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## **Abstract**

Researchers have previously found that school-age refugees and asylum-seekers are frequently characterized as experiencing physical, emotional, or psychological disabilities or disorders in schools because of the adversity that they face and a lack of adequate resources during their refugee journey. In their relocated society, many refugee students are interpreted as having disabilities or receiving special education services. While refugee experiences are often framed as causing deficits in students, the purpose of this study was to better understand the interplay of (dis)ability and refugee identity at a school that publicly proclaimed refugee experience as an asset. Grounded in a qualitative methodology, I designed a qualitative study examining experiences of North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) who relocated to South Korea. I utilized participant observations, document analysis, and interviews with students, teachers, and school leaders at an alternative school in South Korea, exclusively serving North Korean SRB.

The findings of this study build on previous research by demonstrating how disability can become embodied, not only through refugee experiences, but also through the effects of living with a stigmatized identity, social structures, policies, and structures of education in a new society. North Korean SRB began to develop identities forged at the intersection of refugee identity and (dis)ability in South Korean schools and society at large. The stigma and economic circumstances that students in this study experienced after their relocation illustrate how they began to be associated with elements of disability, only after coming to South Korea. Findings also demonstrated the culturally relevant philosophical approaches and practices that teachers used to support North Korean SRB to develop a positive understanding about their identity. I

conclude this study with discussions of implications and recommendations directed to educators, school administrators and practitioners.

SCHOOLING AT THE INTERSECTION OF REFUGEE IDENTITY AND (DIS)ABILITY:  
IMPLICATIONS FROM NORTH KOREAN STUDENTS WITH REFUGEE  
BACKGROUNDS

by

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Dissertation

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Special Education

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Appendices.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Aims of Research .....	3
Research and Context.....	5
Research Questions .....	10
Theoretical Framework .....	10
Disability Studies.....	10
Critical Disability Studies .....	11
DisCrit.....	15
Applying CDS and DisCrit to understand intersectionality of North Korean SRB .....	20
Significance of Research.....	23
Terminology .....	24
Conclusion.....	25
<b>Chapter Two: Historical, Cultural, and Social Context of Korea.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Literature Review on Refugee Education .....	28
The Introduction of Modern Education in Korea: A Colonial Legacy .....	32
Neocolonial Influence on the Development of Modern Education in South Korea.....	34
Social Exclusion towards Individuals with Marginalized Identities.....	36
Emergence of biracial identity in South Korea .....	37
Social exclusion of individuals with biracial identity.....	39
Demographic Change and Racial Discrimination in South Korea .....	41
Multicultural Education in Current South Korea.....	43
Challenges that North Korean SRB face in South Korean Society .....	46
Conclusion.....	49
<b>Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Methods .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Qualitative Methodology .....	51
Constructivist grounded theory .....	53
Research Setting.....	55
Positionality .....	56
Data Collection.....	58
Methods .....	58
Participant observation.....	58
Participant selection and interviews .....	60
Documents.....	65
Data Analysis .....	66
Grounded theory analysis.....	67
Language and ethical considerations .....	68
Conclusion .....	69



<b>Chapter Four: Socio-political Aspects of Refugee Identity .....</b>	<b>70</b>
Shifting Social and Political Identities .....	71
A shift in legal status as refugees .....	72
A shift in socioeconomic status in South Korea.....	75
North Koreans as linguistic minority in South Korea.....	79
Multicultural students: An imposed identity for North Korean SRB .....	82
Stigmatized identity as North Korean SRB in South Korea .....	83
Survival strategies as North Korean SRB in South Korea .....	84
The privilege of being South Korean.....	88
Navigating through Different Educational Systems.....	90
Increased access to formal and free education in South Korea .....	90
Limited opportunities for other minority students .....	94
Different educational goals and expectations.....	96
Conclusion .....	100
<b>Chapter Five: The Politics of Embodying (Dis)ability.....</b>	<b>103</b>
Constructed Meanings of Disability.....	104
North Korean SRB's evolving views of disability .....	104
Teachers' evolving view of disability.....	106
How North Korean SRB Embody (Dis)ability .....	108
Living in stressful conditions as North Korean SRB.....	112
Intersectional oppressions towards female North Korean SRB .....	115
Challenges in receiving support for mental health conditions .....	118
North Korean SRB Perceived as (Dis)abled in Different School Context.....	120
Academic identities in South Korean schools.....	120
Emotional and behavioral characteristics of North Korean SRB .....	128
Qualities that North Korean SRB bring to classrooms .....	131
Diverse life experiences and skills of North Korean SRB .....	132
Conclusion .....	135
<b>Chapter Six: Feeling Accepted at Hankook School.....</b>	<b>137</b>
How Students' Backgrounds Are Reflected at Hankook School.....	138
Reflecting students' educational backgrounds in the curriculum.....	138
Helping students unlearn and relearn.....	141
Providing individualized educational support.....	147
Recognizing students' backgrounds as a strength .....	149
Hiring teachers and school staff who share similar backgrounds as students.....	152
Ms. Lee .....	153
Mr. Ju.....	155
Dr. Yoo .....	156
The Role of Student-Teacher Relationships .....	160
Feeling accepted and encouraged to continue schooling.....	161
Challenges of developing strong student-teacher relationships.....	164
Recognizing students' characteristics as strengths .....	165
Hankook School as a Separate School for North Korean SRB.....	169

A separate school environment as a “safe” space.....	169
Concern about a separate school environment.....	173
The Christian Mission School.....	176
Christianity as agency.....	180
Alternative school run by a charity model.....	183
Conclusion.....	185
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>187</b>
Key Findings.....	189
Implications for Researchers, Educators, and Practitioners .....	194
Social construction and embodiment at the intersection of (dis)ability and refugee identity .....	195
Culturally responsive education .....	201
Limitations .....	204
Directions for Future Research .....	204
Conclusion .....	205
<b>Appendix A.....</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Appendix C.....</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>213</b>

## **List of Abbreviations**

CDS: Critical Disability Studies

CRT: Critical Race Theory

DS: Disability Studies

DSE: Disability Studies in Education

KLA: Korean Language Arts

MFSA: Multicultural Families Support Act

MOE: Ministry of Education

PDS: Public Distribution System

ROK: Republic of Korea

SRB: Students with refugee backgrounds

UFC: Ultimate Fighting Championship

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix A: Interview protocol with teachers

Appendix B: Interview protocol with school leaders

Appendix C: Interview protocol with students

## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction**

Imagine that you are a child who recently moved to a new school. Imagine also that the language used to characterize your life experience includes the following words: trauma-filled, crisis, poverty-stricken, learning delay, and a lack of language proficiency. Your teachers and friends associate you with these descriptions from the moment they become aware of your background, before they even begin to know you as an individual. Teachers and other school professionals often characterize school-age refugees, asylum-seekers, or urban youth of color in these ways—as academically inadequate or emotionally and behaviorally challenged (Hickerson & Dunsmore, 2016; McBrien, 2005).

Several countries around the world have seen a sharp increase in the number of school-age refugee or immigrant children, and this trend is likely to continue given current geo-political turmoil (UNHCR, 2016; Martin & Yankay, 2014). During relocation, many school-age refugees and immigrants are denied formal educational opportunities, in part because the conditions in refugee camps are often unstable and do not provide children with formal education (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). After transitioning to a new educational setting in a refugee-accepting country, refugee students are frequently perceived as having academic and social deficits, compared with non-refugee peers (Bal, 2014; Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader, & Albee, 2009; McBrien, 2005). School-age refugees or asylum-seekers are often characterized as having experienced devastating circumstances such as trauma, depression, crisis, and poverty, which cause adverse physical and emotional conditions, as well as educational delays in learning and language proficiency (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004). Individual deficits are often attributed to the social or environmental circumstances that children have experienced, and these

characteristics are typically reported as the culprits in children's academic struggles in a new society (Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015). Due to the tendency to view refugee students' characteristics as deficits in need of remediation, refugee students, as well as other ethnic minority students, continue to be disproportionately identified as having a disability (Bal, 2014; Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader, & Albee, 2009).

The phenomenon of educators and school structures positioning ethnic and cultural minority students as inferior versions of majority students is nothing new. In the United States, researchers have for years developed and expanded culturally responsive educational models that attempt to reframe how educators respond to minority students. An important aspect of culturally responsive approaches to teaching involves acknowledging and valuing the academic and behavioral characteristics that minority students bring into the classroom (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Yet, ethnic minority groups, including students with refugee backgrounds, are often treated as inferior versions of cultural majority students. Cultural and racial minority students are disproportionately categorized as disabled and often receive special education services in more restrictive classrooms, where they are separated from their non-disabled peers (Harry & Klingner, 2014). For example, in Italy, new categories emerging such as special education needs (SEN), specifically targeted students "with cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic disadvantages" (D'Alessio, 2018, para. 6). A growing number of school-age refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants are being included in this category (Migliarini, 2017). While some might laud the provision of specialized services to recently resettled refugee students, this phenomenon is also a structural indicator of the tendency for students to be treated as less abled and less capable versions of majority students.

## **Aims of Research**

The purpose of this study is to understand how (dis)ability is constructed and experienced within the practices and structures of a school for North Korean students who have refugee backgrounds (SRB). Before continuing, I would like to elaborate on my use of the term “(dis)ability” in this dissertation. I use (dis)ability to refer to a socially constructed phenomenon that is dependent on the normative expectation of human characteristics and behavior (Taylor, 2006). The use of the term (dis)ability has been increasingly used by scholars working within a Critical Disability Studies framework. As Schalk (2017) notes, her intention in using parentheses in (dis)ability is to designate “(dis)ability as a system of social norms which categorizes, ranks, and values bodyminds and disability as a historically and culturally variable category within this larger system” (para. 3). Drawing on Schalk’s perspective, I use the term (dis)ability to highlight the notion of disability and ability as a socially constructed idea that both privileges and oppresses individuals in specific contexts, such as students in a given school system.

However, I also recognize that the use of the term (dis)ability, and the similar term dis/ability, have been critiqued. For example, in a recent discussion on the e-mail listserv for the Society for Disability Studies, prominent Disability Studies scholars critiqued the use of parentheses or a slash (“/”) when referring to disability. Critiques include that dis/ability reifies ability as a binary in opposition to disability, attempts to avoid and therefore further stigmatize disability, and that the term is paternalistic in that it suggests someone could or should become abled, even as they are disabled. While I partially agree with these critiques, my use of the term (dis)ability has a different intention. I do not use the term as means to avoid the reality of being disabled, nor to suggest that people can or should become abled, depending on their context.

Instead, I use the term (dis)ability to bring a focus to how (dis)ability is socially constructed through interpretations of difference, without the binary of considering some students as disabled and others as non-disabled. As Connor (2013) writes, normative ideas about the “ideal” or “capable” learners create the binary notion of disability and ability in schools. Anyone whose behavior or academic performance does not meet these normative categories is perceived as deviant, hence needing special education. Thereby, constructing the norms about ability or disability in school contexts legitimates labeling and responding to students in certain ways. By using the term (dis)ability, I am signaling a desire to examine how school practices function to privilege or oppress students by sanctioning certain characteristics, formally or informally, as representing (dis)ability. I believe the term (dis)ability is especially useful for the context in this study given that in South Korea, official designations of disability or of “special education” are not as widely applied. Therefore, examining what it means to be abled or disabled requires looking at subtle, shifting, and informal school practices that demonstrate how both disability and ability (i.e., “dis-ability”) of North Korean SRB are constructed in relation to social norms. In some instances, I do use the term ‘disability’ to refer to the political status or medical/educational designation of disability.

Within my broader aim to understand how (dis)ability is constructed and experienced at a school for North Korean SRB, I was interested in understanding how North Korean SRB describe their identity as students, when asked about their schooling experiences both before and after relocating to South Korea. To what extent do these students view themselves as capable learners? Are there differences in how they perceive their capabilities before and after relocating to South Korea? How do the material and sociocultural conditions of North Korean SRB’s lives contribute to their understanding of themselves as learners? Another aim of this study was to



identify educational practices and underlying educational philosophies evident in an alternative school serving North Korean SRB. Through identifying educational approaches, my goal was to develop an understanding of how educators support the learning and community membership of students in a school specifically designed to support the needs of students with a refugee background.

### **Research and Context**

My interests in learning about schooling experiences of North Korean SRB stems from my experiences teaching in South Korea. For five and a half years (2005-2010), I worked as a public elementary school teacher in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. Because the school was in close proximity to free housing provided to North Koreans by the South Korean government, several North Korean SRB attended the school. I often heard teachers describing North Korean SRB as behaviorally challenging. One of the senior teachers described North Korean SRB as being “violent” because they often used words that conveyed violent meanings, which were not commonly used in public conversations in South Korea. Another teacher labeled a student “emotionally unstable” when he included fierce flames in his free-drawing activity during art class. Teachers also described North Korean SRB as slow or behind in learning compared to their South Korean peers.

The ways that North Korean SRB’s behaviors conflicted with teachers’ expectations are not surprising given that North Korean SRB are unlikely to receive formal education during the journey of relocation and are unfamiliar with aspects of the curriculum and culture of schools in South Korea (Choi, Kim, & Oh, 2008). The tendency for teachers in mainstream schools<sup>1</sup> to

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<sup>1</sup> In my dissertation, I use “mainstream schools” to refer to public and private schools which receive government funding by adhering to the nation-wide curriculum and educational regulations. In order to receive educational funding from the Ministry of Education, schools must adopt at least 50 percent of the national curriculum into their school curriculum, regardless of their public or private designation (ROK, 2017b).

characterize North Korean SRB as deficient versions of their South Korean peers (Kwon, 2006) is, however, not simply a result of individual bias, but is also a product of systemic aspects of South Korean education. A heavy emphasis on test scores and a competitive academic environment in South Korea reinforces negative perceptions about the academic capabilities of some student groups, including North Korean SRB who often score lower on tests or fail to pass standardized tests (Choi, Kim, & Oh, 2008).

The pattern of refugee or immigrant students being viewed as struggling or deficient, as compared to their peers, is not unique to South Korea. For example, in a systematic literature analysis on refugee students' experience in U.S. schools, McBrien (2005) analyzed peer-reviewed articles and book chapters published in the last 25 years that focused on refugee and immigrant students' schooling experiences. McBrien identified several obstacles to school success faced by refugee or immigrant students in the U.S., including low teacher expectations, misinterpreting students' learning difficulties (as indicating low intelligence or learning disabilities), and regarding students' cultural and linguistic practices as deficits to overcome. In an ethnographic study focused on newly arrived Muslim Turkish refugee students in the U.S., Bal (2014) notes that refugee students are first categorized as English Language Learners (ELL) and are then often referred to receive special education services. According to Bal, students who do not obtain English language proficiency within the state required one-year timeline are perceived as either lazy or as having a disability. Teachers recommend that refugee students receive special education services, often outside of the general education classrooms. The tendency for students with refugee backgrounds to be disproportionately regarded as less capable than their peers and educated in classrooms or schools that are separate from their peers calls

attention to the need for examining the education of students with refugee backgrounds not only in the U.S. but also around the world.

In South Korea, faced with the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and school system, a growing number of North Korean SRB are opting to be educated at an alternative school setting that specializes in serving only North Korean SRB (KEDI, 2016; Schwartzman, 2009). Currently, there are six alternative schools<sup>2</sup> specializing in serving North Korean SRB in South Korea. Each school is funded by private donors or foundations. Among these six schools, four of them were founded by or with support from Christian organizations<sup>3</sup> and one by a Buddhist organization. While one might laud the work of these schools and their founding organizations, their existence begs the question: why is it necessary to have separate schools to exclusively serve North Korean SRB in South Korea? What does the existence of these separate schools reveal about the extent to which South Korean mainstream schools are culturally responsive to North Korean SRB and provide the necessary educational support? North Korean SRB are not mandated to attend an alternative school in South Korea; it is a choice. Yet if consideration for North Korean SRB's background and needs are not reflected in teaching practices, such as was commonly the case at the school in which I taught, then attending an alternative school becomes a constrained choice; North Korean SRB can remain in mainstream schools that do not support them or choose a school that may offer more support but isolate them from their South Korean

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<sup>2</sup> In the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of South Korea, alternative school (*daeanhakgyo* in Korean) is described as a form of educational institutions which “provide various education, such as experience-centered education, including field practices, character education and education focused on the development of the traits and aptitudes of individuals for students who drop out of other schools or want to receive education compatible with their traits of character, which correspond to the various kinds of schools” (Article 60-3). Unlike other mainstream schools, these alternative schools are not provided with governmental supports because of their “alternative” purpose.

<sup>3</sup> The information included here is based on each school's website as well as the website of the Educational Support Center for Children from North Korea (<http://www.hub4u.or.kr/hub/main.do>) and Institute for Unification Education (<http://www.uniedu.go.kr/uniedu/home/cms/page/unieng/main.do?mid=UNIENG&main=true>).

peers. In addition, the existence of alternative schools serving North Korean SRB appears to alleviate teachers and policy makers from the responsibility of providing culturally responsive educational supports to North Korean SRB within the mainstream school system.

With the belief that students should have an option that includes both culturally responsive and inclusive schooling, my dissertation aimed to broaden the way that educators might interpret and respond to the characteristics of cultural and ethnic minority students, specifically those with refugee backgrounds. I wanted to identify educational practices and underlying approaches that recognize and value students' diverse refugee experience. I identified an alternative high school, Hankook school (pseudonym)—one of the six schools which exclusively serves North Korean SRB—in South Korea. Hankook school was founded in the early 2000s through a collaborative effort by multiple Christian organizations with an aim to develop an educational model for a post-unified Korean society. One reason I chose Hankook school as the research site for this study is because of the significance of students' refugee backgrounds as described in the school's stated educational philosophy. The goal of Hankook school is to develop a successful educational model for post-unified Korean society through serving North Korean SRB who have experienced both North and South Korean societies and school systems. In their mission statement, the school's leaders emphasize that North Korean refugee background is an asset for students in their efforts to become community members and leaders in the movement for a post-unified Korean society. The school's leaders also explain their view toward North Korean SRB by stating, "In Hankook school, we help our students (school-age North Koreans and children of North Korean relocators) to become model citizens of democratic society as well as experts in their fields in the future<sup>4</sup>." The leaders of Hankook

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<sup>4</sup> All translation in this dissertation is mine. Korean-English translation for the excerpts in this dissertation have been checked by Dr. Kim (committee member of this dissertation) for accuracy.

school believe that the unique perspectives and background that North Korean SRB bring to South Korean society will be a “strength rather than a weakness or deficit.” Given the school’s mission, it served as an ideal site for me to examine the extent to which students’ refugee identities and experiences are recognized and valued in school curricula, teaching, and, administration.

At the same time, I recognize the tension of doing research in a restrictive or segregated alternative school, while simultaneously advocating for culturally relevant education in general education schools or what is often called “inclusive education.” As mentioned earlier, the existence of alternative schools could be interpreted as alleviating the responsibility of educators and policy makers to provide culturally responsive educational supports for North Korean SRB. Hence, the alternative school model could be understood as maintaining or even promoting segregation between North Korean SRB and their South Korean peers. Yet, I believe that studying environments that many would characterize as “non-inclusive” in the sense of being separate from general education schooling, can be an important means to identifying effective practices for supporting students that can in turn be implemented to develop more inclusive settings. Through documenting examples of how teachers and school leaders respond to needs of students—even if in restrictive settings—I hoped that I would be able to identify methods of supporting refugee students which I could disseminate to pre- and in-service teachers, administrators, and policy makers whose decisions and practices greatly impact refugee students. Data collected from separate school environments created for students with marginalized identities could then be used to restructure educational practices, to ensure that decisions about where to attend schools is not such a constrained choice.

## Research questions

In order to examine the experiences of North Korean SRB and the practices and approaches at Hankook school, I asked the following research questions:

1. How do North Korean SRB describe their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee backgrounds and relocation to South Korean society?
2. How is (dis)ability constructed and experienced by North Korean SRB in South Korean schools?
3. How do students, teachers, and school leaders who attend or work for an alternative school for North Korean SRB in South Korea describe the philosophical approaches and practices used in the school?

## Theoretical Framework

My approach to this study is guided by a framework that attempts to explain how refugee status and (dis)ability intersect in individuals' lives. Even among refugee students who are not recognized as having a disability in a medical sense, many are characterized as lacking certain "abilities" as learners (Lee, 2007). Refugee students can experience a shifting identity change from a "normal" kid to a "delayed" or "disabled" student in the school setting in which they relocate (Cho, 2014). To theoretically support how I examine the intersection of refugee identity and (dis)ability in a school, I utilize a Disability Studies framework. More specifically, I ground this study in two areas within Disability Studies: DisCrit, and Critical Disability Studies (CDS).

**Disability studies.** Having emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the concept of disability as a social phenomenon (Taylor, 2006). Scholars have examined issues around disability with a variety of disciplines including literature, law, film, and education (Berger, 2013; Gabel, 2005). While there is no unifying

theoretical framework in the field, a common thread that runs throughout Disability Studies is the partial or full rejection of traditional medical views of disability as a deficit inside individuals that should be treated. Instead, Disability Studies offers an array of approaches (e.g., a British social model, a North American minority group model, human rights models in western and nonwestern societies, social constructionism, and a Nordic relational model), which all theorize disability as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Within these different approaches, Shakespeare (2014) has identified the issue of combating oppression of disabled people as an underlying theme:

All of these approaches reject an individual understanding of disability, and to different extents locate the disabled persons in a broader context. To varying degrees, each of these approaches shares a basic political commitment to improving the lives of disabled people, by promoting social inclusion and removing the barriers that oppress disabled people. (p. 2)

Theorizing disability as an oppressive sociopolitical identity is illustrative of the “critical” orientation of Disability Studies scholarship; with its roots in activism, scholars in Disability Studies have questioned predominant social practices and structures that marginalize individuals who are viewed as disabled and treated within a medicalized response to disability. The social model approach, in particular, has politicized disability by focusing on issues such as the cultural representation of people with impairments, and the relationship between disability, capitalism, and other forms of discrimination. (Shakespeare, 2014).

**Critical disability studies.** Critical Disability Studies (CDS) is a sub-discipline of the larger field of Disability Studies. If Disability Studies scholarship already “critically” examines predominant social practices and structures that marginalize individuals who are viewed as disabled, then what distinguishes Critical Disability Studies (CDS) from Disability Studies? One

way to understand the “critical” in CDS is as a critique of the current limitations of Disability Studies. Goodley (2013) writes, “The word ‘critical’ denotes a sense of self-appraisal; re-assessing where we have come from, where we are at and where we might be going” (p. 632). Several British and Australian CDS scholars, among others, aim to rethink the conventions and assumptions in the field of Disability Studies scholarship and the theories that have long been drawn upon to understand and describe disability (Shildrick, 2012). For example, Shakespeare and Watson (2001) critique the long-standing use of the social model in Disability Studies as the primary means of analyzing and explaining disability. The authors argue that while a strong social model has contributed to an understanding of disability as a social oppression, disability should also be understood as a result of a confluence of biological, psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical forces. Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) argue that re-thinking theories within Disability Studies is consistent with a “critical self-reflexivity” that is necessary for a critical social theory to recognize the historicity changing dynamics—of society and thus of how individuals and groups are positioned (p. 53).

Another way of understanding the critical aspect of CDS is its alignment with Marxist-influenced critical theory. CDS differs from mainstream Disability Studies through an emphasis on material consequences when theorizing disability (Goodley, 2013). Materialism—largely influenced by Marxism—is a critical framework which considers the physical circumstances in which bodies exist. Using a materialist approach, CDS scholars have criticized the transnational capitalism which excludes many disabled bodies from mainstream life (Erevelles, 2011; Goodley, 2013). Thus, CDS explains how disability is politically constituted, maintained, and contextualized in a way to perpetuate the dominant discourse in material society (Oliver, 2013). A materialist approach illustrates an evolution of social interpretations of disability. For example,



in her book, “Disability and difference in global contexts,” Erevelles (2011) uses a historical materialist framework to explain how the disabled body is created within the social relationships of political dynamics and capitalism. Through wars, political conflicts, imbalanced economic power, and modern imperialism, individuals are forced to embody disabilities. Materialism enables CDS to address disability issues as political and structural problems embedded in society. Thus, while the social model long used in disability was always political, materialist approaches in CDS extend the politicization of disability through a Marxist-influenced critical theory.

The focus on material conditions within CDS also brings increased attention to disability and the body. Embodied aspects of disability have been emphasized within feminist disability studies, which challenges normative ideas about bodies in relation to their social and material environments (Garland-Thomson, 2005). CDS scholars have been critical of the social model of disability for establishing disharmony between impairment and disability, which politicizes disability while sometimes portraying impaired bodies as apolitical realities (Erevelles, 2011; Shakespeare, 2014). Thus, the absence of impaired body in the social model of disability creates invisibility of disabled individuals in society in terms of how they become impaired and how they consequently experience this impairment as disability. By dismissing the importance of the “critical realist concept of the body,” the social model fails to explain our bodies in relation to social context (Goodley, 2013, p. 634).

Instead, a CDS approach focuses on the embodiment of impairment in relation to social, economic, and political spaces. CDS scholars emphasize disability as the corporeal meaning of impaired body. Because the meaning of body is ever changing in relation to political and historical contexts, the presence of disabled body troubles the normative idea of the “able-

bodied” in society (Goodley, 2013, p. 634). Further, the tendency to become impaired in the first place is influenced by the specific circumstances of a social context, often influenced by global power dynamics; impairment is particularly visible in places where individuals are more vulnerable to natural disasters of transnational capitalism. Thus, not only does society pose barriers for people with disabilities as the social model has theorized, but impairments to begin with can be understood as a form of social embodiment (Connell, 2011; Thomas, 2004).

Another important element of a CDS framework is an intersectional approach. Intersectionality generally refers to attempts to theorize the social phenomenon of marginalization of minoritized individuals and groups through the consideration of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Disability Studies has been criticized as lacking attention to intersectionality when theorizing disability. For example, Bell (2010) criticizes the field of Disability Studies for not accounting for race and ethnicity when examining disability, asking if the field might be better called “white disability studies” (p. 374). In leaving race and ethnicity unexamined, Bell argues, Disability Studies tends to provide a white, mainstream discourse that does not examine the fundamental problem of society’s obsession with whiteness and ability. Conversely, other critical fields of studies have also neglected to include disability as a central point of analysis. As Erevelles and Minear (2010) write, there is an “unconscious non-analysis of disability as it intersects with race, class, and gender oppression” in Critical Race Feminism (p. 128). As Goodley (2013) describes, intersectionality involves difficult conversations across sociocultural categories and forms of interpellation to ask how, for example, disability, gender, race, sexuality and class constitute or contradict one another.

A final aspect of CDS that is relevant to this study is the analysis of how disability is constructed in relation to normative expectations of ability. CDS attempts to address how

disability becomes constructed when people "are judged to fail to match up to the ideal individual" by shifting the focus of analysis from the disabled person to abled individuals, and the language and policies of a sociopolitical context which legitimize what counts as ability (Goodley, 2013, p. 639). This critical lens illustrates how ability is the starting point for understanding who is disabled and why, because people with disabilities are often depicted as flawed versions of able-bodied people in utilitarian societies (i.e., as a burden rather than a contributor).

In sum, CDS could be understood as a new iteration of Disability Studies, one that is a launching point for re-thinking and expanding Disability Studies' theoretical underpinnings. CDS politicizes disability through a materialist and intersectional approach to explaining the lives of disabled individuals. CDS also attempts to make ability a center of analysis, recognizing that disability can only exist in relation to ability (hence (dis)ability or dis/ability). Further, scholars in CDS also emphasized the importance of considering embodiment aspects of disability, in addition to sociocultural factors. Along the lines of embodiment, scholars in CDS have begun to take a transnational approach to disability, critiquing mainstream discourses of human rights and identity-based disability for not attending to how disability is embodied and produced as the result of unequal global systems of power (Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011).

**DisCrit.** Various approaches within Disability Studies have been used as frameworks for educational research in the sub-field of Disability Studies in Education. Scholars in Disability Studies have examined practices at the intersection of disability and schooling with a focus on critiquing predominant practices in Special Education that are rooted in more medicalized views of disability (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). DSE scholars have illustrated how disability identity is constructed in schools and how certain disability labels are attributed to

particular groups of students based on perceived or actual differences. For example, DSE researchers assert that race, class, and gender influence how certain academic and behavioral characteristics are interpreted in schools, leading to disproportionate representation of students of color in certain disability categories (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Further, Blanchett, Klingner, and Harry (2009) argue that there have been far too few discussions on the intersection of race, culture, language, disability, and schooling in educational research, even though students of color have been disproportionately represented in special education for more than 35 years in American schools.

Examining the intersection of race, culture, language, disability, and many other factors has recently become a fundamental framework for analyzing the systemic problems in education and society at large. A long history in the United States of underserved individuals with minoritized identities has led to increased discussions about the importance of understanding disability as an intersectional identity and social position. This has led to the emergence of a new framework, DisCrit. Within the interdisciplinary field of study in Disability Studies, DisCrit brings multi-faceted lenses with which to understand disability in relation to other intersecting forms of oppression.

In an attempt to increase the focus of race and disability as intersectional identities, Disability Studies scholars have introduced DisCrit as a new theoretical framework. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) describe DisCrit as a framework based on the belief that the identities of disability and race cannot be understood separately in the context of U.S. society; racism and ableism are collusive, working together in ways to validate and reinforce each other. Arguing for the need for a multi-dimensional lens to understand the intersectionality of disability and other

identities, they ground DisCrit in the theoretical foundation of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT):

...to push DS and CRT to academically and practically bridge commonalities utilizing the tensions between the theories as places for growth instead of resistance and separation. Ultimately we want to extend CRT and DS in ways that are useful and thoughtful to better understand how concepts of race and ability are intertwined (p. 6).

Acknowledging the structural power of ableism and racism in society, scholars using DisCrit analyze how race contributes to positioning one on either side of binary categories—normal or abnormal, abled or disabled—and foregrounds how such lines were historically, socially, and politically drawn. DisCrit also considers diverse factors and identities that contribute to complicating the meaning of disability in society, such as class, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and other factors.

Annamma et al. (2013) introduce seven tenets that provide a focus for the kinds of questions and issues that can be addressed through a DisCrit approach. The tenets of DisCrit are described as follows:

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.

4. DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
6. DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and Ability as Property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens.
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance (p. 11).

Among these seven tenets, I discuss Tenets Two and Five because they elucidate the complex meaning of disability as well as race and ethnicity particularly in the South Korean context.

Tenet Two of DisCrit values the multidimensional aspect of identity that plays a critical role in marginalizing individuals with intersectional identities:

DisCrit foregrounds issues that have previously not been given prominence in CRT and recognizes how these other markers of difference from the norm, in addition to race, contribute to constructing dis/ability (e.g., culture, sexuality, language, immigration status, gender, class) (p. 12).

This tenet emphasizes the cultural and educational practices that reflect perceptions of deficit toward students with certain identity markers (i.e., gender, class, language). For example, in U.S. schools, students with minoritized identities are often perceived as having deficits in ability, a perception that exists in conjunction with, rather than in addition to, students' racial and gender identities (Collins, 2013). The intersectionality of students' identities therefore complicates how we understand students' schooling experiences, such as marginalization in schools.

Tenet Five highlights the denial of rights against individuals with stigmatized identities who are positioned in a lower level of racialized hierarchy. In the U.S., racism has been historically used to justify racial segregation and marginalization towards people of color through the denial of equal rights and opportunities in society. Pseudo-scientific knowledge has also been produced as a means to reinforce and justify White supremacy, using beliefs about the intellectual ability of different races (Freedman & Ferri, 2017). As Annamma et al. (2013) write, “DisCrit considers legal, ideological, and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of certain citizens” (p. 14). In schools, the impact of the intersection of race and disability is illustrated by the practices of educating students of color with disabilities in more highly segregated environments, compared to white peers (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Tenet Five, therefore, makes the exclusion of students who are simultaneously marginalized both by their race and disability a focal point of analysis.

The tenets of DisCrit I have described provide the means to advance how we understand disability and race in social, historical, and educational contexts. For example, scholars have long examined why and how students of color or with other minoritized identities are over/under represented in special education classes compared with White, affluent, and able-bodied peers (Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Renae Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005). Recognizing the intertwined meaning of (dis)ability and race, the tenets of DisCrit offer tools to evolve the analysis of this important issue in the field of (special) education. Overall, DisCrit draws Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies to critique hegemonic practices related to both race and disability, and locates these critiques within their historical, legal, and social contexts.

### **Applying CDS and DisCrit to understand intersectionality of North Korean SRB.**

CDS and DisCrit provide theoretical frameworks that I use to understand and explain the circumstances experienced by students with refugee backgrounds, such as the North Korean Students with Refugee Backgrounds (SRB). The relationship between the experiences of individuals with refugee status and (dis)ability is multi-faceted and requires explanations of how sociopolitical and embodied characteristics manifest in specific contexts, such as schools. For example, it is crucial to understand the embodiment of disabilities or impairment amongst refugees, immigrants, or asylum seekers through examining their material conditions. Refugees, immigrants, or asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to experiencing conditions such as wars, political conflicts, imbalanced economic power, or climate disasters, which cause individuals to become disabled (Huang, Mehta, Elo, Cunningham, Stephenson, Williamson, & Narayan, 2011; Pisani & Grech, 2015). North Korean SRB may experience unstable circumstances when defecting which leads to prolonged interrupted formal education and an increased vulnerability to acquired physical, psychological, and emotional disabilities. The relocation from North Korea to South Korea involves a dangerous series of illegal border crossings through China, Thailand, Mongolia, or Vietnam (Lee, 2006). China has become a particularly unsafe place for North Korean refugees. Any North Korean individual whose refugee status is revealed by the Chinese authorities is deported to their homeland where they face harsh repercussions (Aldrich, 2011; KINU, 2017).

North Korean refugees who can receive financial support from their family members in South Korea may take a rather safe journey with help from smugglers in China and between borders. However, those who cannot afford to hire smugglers often spend several months to years in China, hiding their status as a North Korean, until they can manage to relocate to South



Korea. Young female North Koreans with no access to smugglers are targeted for trafficking. They are sold to become a caregiver or a wife to a man with low socioeconomic status or disabilities who is unlikely to find a Chinese spouse. Through their journey of relocation, therefore, North Korean refugees become vulnerable to physical or psychological conditions which may result in acquiring disabilities (Gause & Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012).

While the journey of refugees can help to illuminate aspects of how students can come to embody disabilities, there are further dimensions of the phenomenon of (dis)ability in the lives of these students. Upon relocating to a new school in a new country, refugee students are positioned to navigate in multidimensional identities, such as race, dis/ability, social class, and gender (Tenet Two of the DisCrit). For example, the identity of North Korean SRB changes upon relocation, from a member of the cultural majority in North Korea to a minority in South Korea. North Korean SRB are expected to navigate this identity, including how they are treated by others within social systems (e.g., schooling). Many North Koreans who relocated to South Korea experienced marginalization as a result of a stigma attached to their identity as North Koreans. For example, North Koreans demonstrate stigmatizing characteristics, such as the use of a North Korean accent, thinner and shorter body figures than average South Koreans, and/or a lack of familiarity with South Korean culture. By displaying these stigmatizing identity markers, North Koreans are perceived as a flawed version of citizens who lack expected cultural and economic competency in South Korean society. Further, without cultural and social capital in South Korea, recent North Korean relocators have low socioeconomic status in South Korean society. Therefore, even though North Korean relocators receive legal citizenship upon arrival to

South Korea, they remain economically and culturally marginalized as a minoritized group within South Korean society.

DisCrit's intersectional focus on how individuals and groups are perceived based on their multiple minoritized identities, and then constructed as dis(abled) in a given context, is well suited to provide a critical lens of how the characteristics and identities of North Korean SRB become constructed in South Korean schools. In other words, while many North Korean SRB may not have disabilities in the sense of characteristics that would be described as impairments, they are positioned to be subjected to assumptions about their (dis)abilities that are intertwined with attitudes and practices that target their minoritized cultural identity. School-age North Korean SRB encounter new cultural practices that stigmatize their culture, interpret their differences as deficits, and position them as disabled/disordered as compared to their South Korean peers (Park & Watson, 2011). For example, North Korean SRB often receive 'special' services in the form of multicultural education services or special education services in public schools (Goo, Oh, Yi, & Chang, 2014). This form of supplementary education service often comes with a negative stigma because its purpose is viewed as that of addressing a deficit or a characteristic that marks inferiority compared to these students' peers. Along these lines, a DisCrit framework is useful to examine the tendency of framing certain characteristics of learners as a 'deficit' in the context of schools, with a focus on how perceptions and treatment of students' characteristics are intertwined with their minoritized identities.

A limitation of using Disability Studies as a theoretical framework for my dissertation study is that its foundation is grounded in Western contexts. For example, one aspect of DisCrit that appears to limit its current utility is the narrowness of its theoretical framework. As mentioned, DisCrit is rooted in two theoretical traditions, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and

Disability Studies – both of which have been theorized with almost exclusive consideration for the U.S. and other Western contexts. CRT heavily relies on the social, historical, and, in particular, legal contexts of the United States. Recognizing the limitations of using a theoretical framework grounded in Western context to examine a school in South Korea, I use scholarly works of South Korean scholars and scholars in Korean studies who provide context with which to understand cultural and historical dimensions of (South) Korea. In Chapter Two, I draw on these works to develop an understanding of the local context of disability and individuals with minoritized identities in South Korea, and historically in Korea. In doing so, my goal was to contribute to strengthening and broadening the application of Disability Studies scholarship, in a non-western context.

### **Significance of Research**

Conducting my dissertation fieldwork with North Korean SRB in South Korea provides an opportunity to evolve the research base of understanding intersectional experiences of refugees and (dis)ability. The context of my study makes it possible to disentangle the social construction of race, ethnicity, and language in relation to refugee identity. In many countries, the experiences of refugees are deeply intertwined with race, ethnicity, language, and social class. The confluence of these factors leads to tremendous bias by the racial, cultural, and linguistic majority, making it difficult to isolate how students' backgrounds as refugees become manifested in their academic and social experiences and outcomes (Mosselson, 2006; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999). Conversely, North Korean SRB in South Korea share the same ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds as their majority South Korean peers (Chung, 2008). The South Korean context therefore provides an opportunity to understand the educational experiences of students with refugee backgrounds who are not immediately judged

through the lenses of racial and ethnic majorities that may influence how they are perceived and treated.

Another significance of this dissertation study is its potential contribution to the field of refugee education. While there are growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Asian countries such as North Korea and Burma (KEDI, 2016; UNHCR, 2016), research focused on experiences of school-age refugees or asylum seekers in the Asian region is limited in the field of refugee education. Current research is extensively focused on refugees or asylum-seeking students who relocated to Western or European countries. By examining experiences of North Korean SRB in an Asian context, this dissertation project will expand the discussion on refugee education which has primarily focused on refugees in Western and European countries.

### **Terminology**

**defector vs refugee.** In 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) introduced a legal definition of refugee, as a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 1968, art. I)

Internationally, the UNHCR's definition continues to be used to determine refugee status today.

In research and policy literature, there are several terms used to describe North Koreans in South Korea such as defector, refugee, resettlers, or immigrants. Since the end of the Cold War era<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> While North Korean defectors during the Cold War were considered as betraying their regime for political purposes, recent North Koreans who came to South Korea are characterized as those who voluntarily left their

“refugee” has been increasingly used—replacing “defector”— and I use refugee to describe participants in this study.

**Refugee students vs students who have refugee background.** In her research, Naidoo (2015) delineates differences between the terms “refugee-background students” and “refugee students,” in relation to identity and status of individuals in their relocated society:

...the former (refugee-background students) captures their current status in terms of identity and belonging with nuanced interpretations of citizenship while ‘refugee’ reflects a status of temporary protection and forced migration...(p. 212).

As mentioned previously in this chapter, upon arriving in South Korea, all North Koreans are given South Korean citizenship. Therefore, they no longer have refugee status. Following Naidoo’s conceptualization, I refer to North Korean students who resettled in South Korea as North Korean students who have refugee background (SRB).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced the research questions that guided this dissertation study and the theoretical frameworks that I draw upon to support my understanding of North Korean students with refugee background. In the next chapter, I review research relevant to the context of this study, including international research focused on refugee students’ educational experiences. I also provide an overview of the modern education system in South Korea, which is heavily influenced by the U.S. North Korean SRB have unique positionality, in that they share the same racial and ethnic backgrounds as their majority South Korean peers. However, they are identified as “multicultural students” in South Korean mainstream schools, which clearly

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country in search of political freedom as well as economic wellbeing. Considering the continuous occurrence of human rights violations in the regime, the purpose for the relocation of school-age North Koreans better aligns with the definition of “refugee” by UNHCR than “defector” (Do, Kim, Han, Lee, & Hong, 2015).

indicates their “differences” from their South Korean peers. By providing historical backgrounds of how individuals with biracial identity were treated in South Korea, I attempt to make a connection of how individuals with different identities (e.g., North Korean refugee backgrounds) continue to face oppression in South Korean society.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Historical, Cultural, and Social Context of Korea**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a historical background of the current context in which North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) attend alternative schools within South Korea's school system. I begin by reviewing international research that addresses challenges experienced by refugee or asylum-seeking students in school settings. I then focus in on the context relevant for this study—North Korean SRB—who share similar challenges as refugee or asylum-seeking students around the world. These challenges include dealing with teachers' low expectations, being viewed within a deficit framework, and coping with intersectional marginalization as a cultural, social, and economic minority. I provide a historical background by discussing developments in modern education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Westerners began transporting educational values and social practices into Korea. I highlight the Western influence on modern Korea<sup>6</sup> and a legacy of colonialism. A focal point of this literature is the work of protestant missionaries from the U.S. whose missionary work was integral to the development of Korea's modern education system. Then, in the second part of this chapter, I examine how South Korean society and its education system responded to individuals with marginalized identities, such as biracial students and those identified as having disabilities. This review of the literature helps to establish a pattern in how South Korea has responded to the diversity of its citizens, and also how differences have been culturally constructed and imbued with certain meanings.

In this study, an understanding of South Korea's historical responses to the diversity of its citizens is important to understand the unique conditions that North Korean SRB currently

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I refer to North and South Korea as separate countries, as they are currently autonomous nations. However, in this chapter, I use the term "Korea" to refer to a single country before its division in 1953. I define modern Korea as beginning in 1876 when Korea opened its doors to the outside world and ending in 1945 when Japanese colonialization ceased.

face in South Korean schools. For example, examining policies and attitudes towards diverse citizens over time helps to make sense of why today's North Korean SRB are often discussed through a discourse of having deficits which must be remediated and, in turn, justifies practices of educating them in separate educational settings. Current conditions faced by North Korean SRB parallel the historical evidence of how individuals with marginalized identities have been treated in Korean history. Examining the treatment towards individuals with marginalized identities, therefore, provides readers with contextual knowledge that makes sense of the current discourse and policies in South Korea that affect North Korean SRB.

### **Literature Review on Refugee Education**

There has been a global increase in the number of school-age refugees or asylum-seekers, a trend that is predicted to continue (UNHCR, 2016; Martin & Yankay, 2014). Over the last decade, there has been an increase in research focusing on the educational experiences and challenges that school-age refugees or asylum-seekers face in their relocated society. This research addresses the issues of educational inequality, such as a lack of quality education provided to refugee students in schools. Researchers have also identified policies and practices directed at refugee or asylum-seeking students in schools. Through reviewing research about refugee students' educational experiences in different parts of the world, I aim to provide an understanding of the literature about schooling and refugees. This overview of the literature will help to consider differences and similarities between the current research and the context of this study – North Korean SRB in South Korea.

One of the main challenges that many refugee students face is limited access to meaningful education, compared to other students. For example, Bačáková (2011) argues that in the Czech Republic, refugee students face barriers to full participation and educational benefits,



even though legally all children have a right to receive primary education regardless of nationality or legal status. The author identified the lack of qualified and experienced teachers, resources, and cooperation between school professionals and parents, as reasons for educational inequality for refugee students. In South Africa, Meda, Sookrajh, and Maharaj (2012) also conducted research to examine refugee students' access to education. According to the findings of the study, refugee students are at high risk of being denied access to primary education, and are afforded limited opportunity to secondary education. Even if refugee students were able to enroll in secondary education, they were not provided with quality education, which resulted in a much higher drop-out rate than their South African peers. A number of researchers echo the reality of educational inequality, marginalization, and social oppression that refugee students and their families experience in schools and communities in their relocated country (e.g., Hek, 2005; Mareng, 2010; Mthethwa-Sommers & Kisiara, 2015; Walsh et al., 2011).

Several researchers suggest ways to support refugee students despite these challenges. Naidoo (2008) examined the experiences of tutors in a youth literacy development after-school tutoring program for African refugees in Australia. The author reports status quo teaching practices which reinforce deficit views of refugee students and identify how the participants—pre-service teachers serving as tutors—developed pedagogical approaches that challenge the status quo teaching practices of approaching refugee students as having deficits. Naidoo concludes that teacher education curricula should include a focus on structural forces that marginalize certain groups, so that pre-service teachers can develop the competencies to counteract or change institutional structures through practical teaching approaches. In another study, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) examined the role of schooling and its contribution to the successful resettlement of refugee children in Australia. By looking at educational practices in

four schools which have a positive reputation in refugee education, the researchers identified successful support models for refugee students. Findings indicate that a holistic and inclusive approach—characterized by providing support systems to address learning, social, and emotional needs of students with refugee backgrounds—led by school leaderships and community agencies helped students’ successful resettlement.

Only recently, researchers have begun to examine the relationship between students’ refugee backgrounds and special education – a general term that refers to various models of educational services for students who are deemed eligible. For example, Hurley, Warren, Habalow, Weber, and Tousignant (2014) examined challenges that early childhood educators faced when it comes to identifying young refugee children to be qualified for receiving early childhood special education services. Early childhood educators identified that young refugee children were not receiving appropriate special education services at the appropriate age, due to a lack of validated assessments, wait time for evaluations, and different cultural perspectives and family advocacy. In the suggestion of this study, researchers argued that it is necessary to create assessments that are not dependent on language skills. While not addressing why young refugee children are considered as recipients of special education services in the first place, authors suggest including caregivers to attend the evaluation process for special education services.

In another study, Bal (2014) applied a more critical perspective to understand challenges and changes in academic identities of Muslim Turk refugee students in the U.S. school system. Findings of the study indicate that students with refugee backgrounds are sorted into generic institutional identities (e.g., English language learners) that are predominantly framed through a deficit-oriented cultural model (i.e., difference as deficit). This deficit-oriented cultural model

justifies the exclusion of students with refugee backgrounds from general education settings, and over time, leads them to be identified as needing special education.

Research about the relationship between refugee students and special education reveals that refugee students are frequently interpreted through a deficit lens in their resettled schools (He, Bettez, & Levin, 2017; Keddle, 2012). This should come as no surprise, given how the identity of refugee students is often constructed; school-age refugees or asylum-seekers are frequently characterized as experiencing devastating physical, emotional, and educational conditions such as trauma, depression, crisis, and poverty, as well as delays in learning and language proficiency (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Thabet et al., 2004). Consequently, refugee students—including ethnic, racial, or linguistic minority groups—continue to be disproportionately identified as disabled and placed in special education classrooms around the world (Gabel et al., 2009). North Korean SRB experience a similar phenomenon of being understood through a deficit perspective in South Korean mainstream schools, which often leads them to opt out from mainstream schooling and choose an alternative school to continue their education.

In the next section, I discuss the emergence of South Korea's modern education system, and how it was extensively influenced by U.S. Christian missionaries. Currently, several alternative schools exclusively serving North Korean SRB were founded by Christian organizations or churches based on Christian philosophy. These schools inevitably follow the footsteps of the U.S. Christian missionaries who imported the Western education system and practices into South Korea. Understanding the historic backgrounds of South Korea's modern education and a colonial legacy of the U.S. influence is essential to understand current educational contexts in which North Korean SRB are positioned.

## The Introduction of Modern Education in Korea: A Colonial Legacy

The development of Korea's modern education system is closely related to the Western Christian Overseas Missionary Movement from the United States (Byun, 2015; Lee, 1989). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Korea was compelled to sign a series of treaties with several Western countries (e.g., the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Russia) as well as Japan. These treaties allowed foreign nations to influence economic, political, and social systems in the Korean peninsula. While Japan was focused on colonizing the Korean peninsula, protestant missionaries from the U.S. focused on establishing modern educational and medical institutions. Since xenophobia and anti-Christian attitudes were prevalent in Korea at that time, protestant missionaries strategically used indirect missionary programs to avoid resistance towards foreigners, such as establishing educational, medical, and social services for local people (Park, 1992). For example, in 1885, U.S. protestant missionaries Henry. G. Appenzeller and W.B. Scranton founded the first modern secondary school, *baejaehakdang*<sup>7</sup>, in Korea. Soon after, three more mission schools were founded, including *ihwahakdang*, the first modern school for women.

Traditionally, formal education was only afforded to men from privileged social classes in Confucian Korean society<sup>8</sup>. Emphasizing the equal rights given to men and women, mission schools recruited students regardless of their backgrounds; those who had been traditionally excluded from formal education, such as men from a lower social stratum and women, were now able to access education (Park, 1992). As a result of the desire to learn from individuals who were previously denied education, as well as the Christian Overseas Missionary Movement, the

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<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I use the Revised Romanization system when inserting Korean terms.

<sup>8</sup> The major ideology of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) was Confucianism. Within Confucian bureaucracy during Joseon Dynasty, education was not afforded to those from lower social classes and women (Lee, 2006).

number of mission schools rapidly grew and a few of the schools soon evolved into the first modern universities<sup>9</sup> in Korea (Lee, 1989; Kim, 1962; Suh, 1985; Byun, 2015).

Most subjects taught in mission schools comprised Western “modern” knowledge such as philosophy, English language, and Christian ideologies. The objectives of mission schools were to: 1) convert Korean people to Christianity through education, 2) train local people to become Christian religious leaders, and 3) liberate and empower ordinary Koreans—who were traditionally not given educational opportunities—through education (Kim, 1962; Byun, 2015). Until Protestant missionaries were expelled from Korea by the Japanese colonial government in 1940, indirect missionary programs using education and medical services thrived and expanded (Byun, 2015). Many politicians who were involved in Korea’s independence movement from Japan and recovery movement after the Korean War were graduates of these mission schools, including the first president of the South Korean government, Rhee Syngman.

After Japan lost World War II and gave up their colonial occupation of Korea, the U.S. military government officially occupied South Korea between 1945-1948 as a short-term caretaker of post-war South Korea (Liem, 1949). However, the initial role as a short-term caretaker evolved over time into the U.S. military becoming one of the major stake holders of the South Korean government. Since their military occupation began in 1945, the U.S. government has been directly and indirectly involved in major decision making processes, including those affecting the economy, the military, and education (Park, 2000; Yoo & Palley, 2014). In education, the continued political and communal bond between the South Korean and U.S.

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<sup>9</sup>Union Christian College in Pyeongyang (currently *Soongsil* University in Seoul): [http://eng.ssu.ac.kr/web/eng/intro\\_a\\_01](http://eng.ssu.ac.kr/web/eng/intro_a_01)) and Chosen Christian College (currently *Yonsei* University also in Seoul): [http://www.yonsei.ac.kr/en\\_sc/intro/history1.jsp](http://www.yonsei.ac.kr/en_sc/intro/history1.jsp))

governments was one of the major reasons South Korean policy makers embraced many of the educational ideologies and practices of the U.S.

### **Neocolonial Influence on the Development of Modern Education in South Korea**

U.S. missionaries influenced South Korea's education policies, school systems, and culture, by establishing educational institutions in modern Korea. Protestant Christians developed several mission schools in Korea, despite initially facing xenophobia and anti-Protestantism (Dobbin, Simmons, & Garrett, 2007; Park, 2000). As a result, the number of mission schools founded by Christian organizations is by far the largest among religious schools in South Korea<sup>10</sup>. As of 2010, 30.2 percent of higher education institutions and 9.6 percent of high schools were founded by Christian organizations<sup>11</sup> (KESS, 2010).

As Christianity prospered in South Korea, many South Korean Christian organizations have taken a similar approach to that of U.S. missionaries—regenerating and practicing the legacy of the American missionary projects within and outside of South Korea. Internationally, South Korea has become one of the top five largest countries sending Christian missionaries abroad (Steffan, 2013). Many South Korean Christian missionaries initiate voluntary outreach projects, such as providing medical aid, helping individuals with disabilities, and teaching English to local people in countries in the global South or middle East (Kim, 2010). Domestically, Christian organizations and churches have supported minority groups, including the homeless, individuals with disabilities, and North Koreans who relocated to South Korea (Chung, 2016). While the initiatives from Christian organizations have supported marginalized

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<sup>10</sup> The ratio of higher education institutions founded by religious organizations in 2010: Christian schools (83.08%), Catholic schools (10.77%), Buddhist schools (6.15%).

<sup>11</sup> The ratio of Christian mission schools in 2010: Kindergarten (5.91%), Elementary school (0.48%), and Middle School (5.08%).

local people, Kim (2010) asserts that these charity efforts are an exercise of neocolonialism<sup>12</sup> in that they maintain status quo power relations between minority groups and mainstream South Koreans and privilege first world values.

Currently, a number of Christian missionary organizations have initiated charity programs to help North Korean refugees who comprise the lower socioeconomic status in South Korea (KWMA, 2016). The discourse underpinning current charity programs, however, depicts North Koreans as needing to assimilate as South Korean citizens. Charity programs mainly focus on helping North Korean refugees quickly adjust to South Korean culture as well as become economically independent in capitalist South Korean society (Lee, 2015). The South Korean government uses a similar assimilationist approach addressing North Koreans, who are expected to adjust in South Korean society. In South Korea's Resettlement Policies, North Koreans are depicted as those "who are in need of education and training to become members of capitalist South Korea" (Kim, 2016, p. 189). Living in South Korea as participants in charity programs as well as in the South Korean government's Settlement Programs, North Koreans inevitably become exposed to neocolonial discourse that South Korean values and cultures are superior to those of the North. The neocolonial discourse manifested in the charity or government-funded programs provided to North Koreans echoes the message of North Koreans as a minoritized group who need to change and improve themselves to be more like South Korean citizens. In the next section, I provide historical context of how the South Korean society and education system has responded to individuals with marginalized identities, which shows great similarities to current challenges faced by North Korean SRB.

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<sup>12</sup> I refer to neocolonialism as the continued imperial system of economic exploitation or political exploitation over a society in the absence of formal political control (Young, 2016). Rieger (2004) argues that neocolonialism is more subtle than traditional colonialism, therefore, its dark side is often overlooked, even though it is just as powerful as colonialism.

## **Social Exclusion towards Individuals with Marginalized Identities**

In Chapter One, I discussed DisCrit, an intersectional framework that emphasizes a need to understand one's multidimensional identities (Annamma et al., 2013). I draw on DisCrit as a means to make sense of how a confluence of identities, whether politically recognized or not, can work together to disable individuals, in the sense of marginalizing their participation or influence in society. North Korean SRB are positioned at the intersection of multiple identities; they are identified by the government as multicultural individuals, and within schools as academically and behaviorally maladjusted students (Mang, Gil, & Choi, 2013; MEHR, 2008). Though North Korean SRB may often not receive a formal disability identification, they take on a similar educational status, as a deficient version of their peers, thus experiencing marginalization at the intersection of multicultural and (dis)abled identities. The tendency that North Korean SRB are considered as "maladjusted multicultural students" in mainstream schools justifies separate education for them, which is attributed to their lack of preparation, or lack of ability to succeed in mainstream schooling.

Ironically, the challenges experienced by current North Korean SRB resemble the challenges that biracial individuals faced several decades ago in South Korean society. The cultural experiences of these groups (North Korean SRB and biracial students) share common themes, such as social exclusion through institutionalization, overseas adoption, and/or segregated schooling. In this section, I examine how South Korean society has developed a unique way of understanding human diversity, specifically towards those with biracial identity. I include discussions on the social and legal exclusion of individuals with biracial identity in South Korean society. Providing an overview of how individuals with biracial identities have not been considered as full citizens in South Korea can bridge the understanding about how and why



North Korean SRB are seen as inferior versions of their peers in South Korean schools and society.

**Emergence of biracial identity in South Korea.** After the Japanese colonial rule, (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), South Korea continued to have a military presence from the U.S. as a means to support its national security. As a result of U.S. intervention, the number of U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea drastically increased (Kim, 2009). Near U.S. military bases, commercial-service districts called *gijichon*, were gradually developed. In *gijichon*, local South Koreans started small businesses for U.S. soldiers, such as restaurants serving western food, bars, laundromats, and tailors. Meanwhile, the South Korean government discretely made prostitution available for U.S. soldiers in these districts (Kim, 2009). Although prostitution was never officially legal in South Korea (ROK, 2004), the power disparity of the U.S. and South Korea's patron-client relationship led the South Korean government to promote *gijichon* prostitution as a means to serve the increasing number of U.S. soldiers (Moon, 1997). The result was biracial children born to Korean women and U.S. soldiers.

The social stigma and discrimination towards mothers and their biracial children was extremely harsh (Seol, 2007). South Koreans considered biracial children as products of an unethical relationship between *gijichon* prostitutes and U.S. soldiers, regardless of their parents' occupation or marital status<sup>13</sup>. With stigmatized racial identity markers, biracial children were easily distinguished from ethnic Koreans and inevitably marginalized. Mothers of biracial children were blamed for ruining the purity of genealogy as ethnic Koreans which has been praised for thousands of years in Korea (Kang, 2008). Several derogatory terms were also

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<sup>13</sup> Although many biracial children born to South Korean women were considered as children of prostitutes, some were born from intimate relationships or marriages between South Koreans and foreigners, as well as through rape by U.S. soldiers (Kim et al., 2003).

created and widely used to refer to biracial children such as, *twigi* (a hybrid between a male donkey and a cow), *geomdungi* (black person), *yanki* (white person) or *honhyeol* (mixed blood) (Kim & Woo, 2012). The reference to animals in the term *twigi* particularly shows how biracial individuals were described as less than human. These examples of derogatory terms also illustrate the narrow views held by South Koreans about human diversity and the prevalence of racial discrimination in post-war South Korean society.

For the South Korean government, the emergence of biracial children was an unprecedented challenge because biracial children were understood as a symbol of the government's failure to protect its citizens (Kim, 2009). To resolve the situation, the government initially planned to institutionalize biracial children in orphanages. However, this plan could not be realized because of a lack of funding necessary to maintain institutions, while the country was still recovering from the war (Cho & Park, 2013). As an alternative to institutionalization, the government began to promote overseas adoption of biracial children to foreign countries, mainly the U.S. The rationale for promoting overseas adoption was sending biracial children to their father's country where their physical appearances would be deemed as a closer resemblance to local residents (Kim, 2009). To promote overseas adoption, the government not only strategically advertised positive aspects of overseas adoption through newspapers and flyers, but it also further appealed to the U.S. government to accept greater numbers of South Korean biracial children and war orphans (Cho & Park, 2013). In reaction to the South Korean government's appeal, the Eisenhower administration approved an emergency measure before the Refugee Relief Act<sup>14</sup> expired in 1956, allowing 659 more South Korean biracial children to be

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<sup>14</sup>The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 was passed by the U.S. Congress in August of that year and allowed for 4,000 orphans, younger than 10 years old, from any country with oversubscribed quotas, to be adopted in the United States by American citizens (Kim, 2009).

adopted by American families (Kim, 2009). Since the first overseas adoption to the U.S. in 1954, the number of biracial adoptees reached 3,256 by 1960 and the growth of overseas adoption continued until the early 1980s (Kim et al., 2003).

Meanwhile, biracial children who remained in South Korea experienced social and institutional marginalization, without legal safeguards to protect their rights as South Korean citizens (Cho & Park, 2013). Influenced by a Confucian tradition that emphasizes male superiority, the South Korean legal system embraced a paternalistic tradition. For example, until 1997, only children fathered by South Korean citizens were given citizenship, regardless of the mother's citizenship (Kim et al., 2003; ROK, 1997a). As a result, many biracial children born to U.S. soldiers remained undocumented or had to be adopted by their maternal grandfather in order to be legally accepted as South Korean citizens (Kang, 2008; Kim et al., 2003).

**Social exclusion of individuals with biracial identity.** Biracial children were not given equal educational opportunity compared with their ethnic Korean<sup>15</sup> peers. In 1962, as the first generation of biracial children reached the age of compulsory education, the Ministry of Education opened the first public special school, *Yeonghwa* elementary school, exclusively serving biracial children in Seoul. Two hundred and forty biracial children initially enrolled in the school (Kim et al., 2003). In contrast to general education schools in the 1960s, the curriculum of this school included English because students were considered potential overseas adoptees who would need to speak their fathers' language in the future. This special elementary school for biracial children was closed only two years after its establishment due to a lack of government funding, a common issue in post-war South Korea. After the closing of *Yeonghwa*

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<sup>15</sup>I use the term 'ethnic Korean' to differentiate from biracial or interracial Koreans in this chapter.

elementary school, the school's students were integrated into mainstream schools (Kim et al., 2003).

Many biracial students who were integrated into mainstream classrooms were subjected to discrimination and bullying because of the social stigma related to their appearance as racially impure Koreans (Kim, 2009). Because of the discrimination and frequent bullying, many biracial students dropped out of school, which further resulted in chronic unemployment and poverty (Cho & Park, 2013; Kang, 2008). For young biracial dropouts, there were only a few vocational education programs available, which were provided by individual philanthropists or educators. The purpose of vocational education was focused on helping biracial young adults learn job-related skills to prepare for emigration to other countries (Kim et al., 2003). Biracial young adults were hardly ever included as full South Korean citizens in the education system or in society.

Biracial individuals, especially men, were restricted from certain legal rights and obligations until quite recently in South Korea. For example, under the South Korean constitution, any able-bodied South Korean man must serve military duty with no exceptions<sup>16</sup> (ROK, 2007). However, some able-bodied Korean men with “clear” biracial or interracial identity markers—those whose racial origins were deemed as having African or Caucasian ancestry—were exempted from compulsory duty until the Military Service Act was amended in 2010. Interracial Korean men with one parent from an Asian country such as Japan, China, or Vietnam, and therefore more similar in appearance with majority ethnic Koreans, were not exempted from military duty (ROK, 2007). The determination of racial identity markers for the military duty exemption followed a subjective decision-making process. Further, the rationale for

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<sup>16</sup> North and South Korea are two of just a few countries which have compulsory military duty (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

the exemption of black or white biracial/interracial ethnicity from military duty has changed over time. At different times, the South Korean government has announced the reason for excluding South Korean men with black or white biracial/interracial identity markers as: 1) their different appearance will be easily targeted by the enemy during wartime; 2) those with different racial identities are more likely to experience isolation or bullying by their peers in the military; and 3) white or black interracial Korean men with dual-citizenships are more likely to give up their Korean citizenship upon reaching the age of 20 to avoid serving in South Korea's military duty (ROK, 2007).

In this section, I have examined how individuals with biracial/interracial identity markers have been culturally and socially marginalized in post-war South Korean society. Children born to biracial couples were denied their rights to education and full participation in society as South Korean citizens through institutionalization, special education, and exclusion from society. Students with biracial identity faced discrimination and bullying because of the social stigma attached to their “abnormal” and “shameful” identity in South Korea. The phenomenon of excluding individuals with biracial identity is illustrative of a pattern of exclusion in how South Korean society has responded to various elements of human diversity. In the next section, I discuss how the understanding of ethnic and racial diversity has evolved with rapid demographic change in South Korea. Further, I discuss the intersectional marginalization faced by students with multicultural family backgrounds in schools.

### **Demographic Change and Racial Discrimination in South Korea**

Discrimination against *honhyeol* (biracial/interracial individuals, meaning “mixed-blood”) in post-war South Korean society was primarily a product of Korean ethnocentrism. Anyone whose racial identity markers were different from those of majority ethnic Koreans were

rejected as members of South Korean society (Paik, 2000). Yet, in light of globalization and a growing South Korean economy, racial and ethnic demographics quickly changed. Economic growth in the country has attracted many foreign workers to relocate to South Korea. Another contributing factor in racial and ethnic diversity is the expanding commercial international-marriage market. As a result of rapid industrialization, young generations who used to reside in rural areas moved to cities seeking increased employment opportunities. For those who remained working in agricultural jobs in rural areas, mostly single men, it became difficult to find life partners (Choi, 2012; Hwang, 2011; Yang, 2015). With little possibility for marrying South Korean women, many single men looked for wives from South East Asian countries, such as China, Vietnam, or Mongolia in a commercialized marriage market (Hong, 2007). As a result of commercial marriages, the number of international marriages increased from 1.2% in 1990 to 13.6% in 2005 among married couples in South Korea. The population of children from these biracial/bi-ethnic couples continues to grow (Statistics Korea, 2015).

As the ethnic and racial diversity increased, the longstanding stigma towards those with interracial/biracial identity, *honhyeol*, has reported to be decreased; however, discrimination against one's race, ethnicity, and nationality is still evident in current South Korean society. Incidents of racial discrimination against immigrants and their children from non-Western or developing countries are frequently reported in South Korean media (Choi, 2017; Kim, 2012). Racial treatment often corresponds with Western capitalist and cultural values that South Korea has gradually embraced through close political, economic, and cultural ties with the U.S. and other Western countries (Ha, 2012; Kim, 2014). Therefore, white Westerners are privileged and are often associated with positive images of being affluent and speaking proficient English, whereas those with non-white and non-Korean identities are more likely to be associated with

poor or primitive images, which is often looked down upon (Cho et al., 2007; Jo, Lee, Kwon, Seo & Lee, 2007). Immigrants and foreign workers from non-Western or developing countries with less influence in the global economy are often afforded low-paying and high-risk jobs, while those from Western and/or English-speaking countries have more job opportunities with higher wages and safer working conditions (Kim, 2011). The manifestation of White privilege in South Korea influences not only the job market but also the beauty industry. The racial identity markers of Caucasian, such as lighter skin tone, big nose, and deep eyes are considered “beautiful” or “handsome” amongst younger generations. In consequence, South Korea’s beauty industry—including cosmetic markets and plastic surgery—has developed to fulfill the needs of those who want to have lighter skin tone and a larger nose (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

White privilege has been evidenced in students’ understanding about their biracial friends. For example, White-Korean biracial children are often considered beautiful, wealthy or smart. The popularity of several White-Korean biracial singers among young adults in current pop culture illustrates the high regard held for White-Korean ethnicity. On the other hand, many students with multicultural identities whose parents are Korean and non-White tend to hide their multicultural backgrounds to avoid bullying or adverse attitudes from their peers and teachers (Cho, Lee, Kwon, Seo, & Lee, 2007).

### **Multicultural Education in Current South Korea**

In response to South Korea’s growing racial and cultural diversity as well as international trends towards multiculturalism, the Ministry of Education (MOE) mandated that multicultural education be included in the 2007 nationwide public school’s curriculum in all grade levels (MEHR, 2008). Schools were mandated to initiate and provide educational supports for students

from multicultural families<sup>17</sup> as well as create school activities to promote all students' understanding about multiculturalism. However, educators and researchers have criticized South Korea's multicultural education for not integrating a clear commitment to the philosophies of embracing and respecting students' different identities in classrooms (Cho et al., 2007; Choi, 2012; Hwang, 2011; Yang, 2015). Educational programs developed to promote multicultural education are often targeted to students from multicultural families to help their integration into South Korean society. For instance, students identified as having multicultural family backgrounds are encouraged to join field trips to historic sites or after-school programs that focus on learning Korean language and culture. By participating in "multicultural education programs," students with multicultural family backgrounds are essentially singled out from their ethnic Korean peers, sending the message to students that "multicultural students" are different or "special."

South Korea's assimilationist approach in multicultural education identifies individuals as part of a minority group for the purpose of normalizing their characteristics through education. The labelling of students as "multicultural students" based on their cultural, ethnic, or racial identities, enforces a hegemonic educational hierarchy by privileging certain students—who demonstrate characteristics and identity markers as "normal" South Koreans—and devaluing the characteristics of others (Longmore, 1985). In other words, the mechanism of labelling certain groups of students as "multicultural students" has created a social status of subordination that reinforces prejudice associated with multicultural identities. An assimilationist approach towards students with multicultural family backgrounds is indicative of a narrow understanding of, and

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<sup>17</sup> In 2008, the Multicultural Families Support Act (MFSA) was also established in order to provide legal supports for individuals from multicultural family backgrounds (ROK, 2008). According to the MFSA, individuals from "multicultural families" include those who acquired South Korean citizenship through work immigration, marriage immigration or child/ren whose parents are South Korean citizens.



way of responding to, human diversity in South Korea, as the government pressures students with multicultural identities to change themselves to become closer to what the government and wider culture view as “normal” South Koreans.

A deficit and assimilationist approach in multicultural education is similar to medicalized approaches to disability in schools, often carried out through systems of special education.

Through a medical model, disability is perceived as an individual characteristic that needs to be fixed, removed, or overcome (Gabel, 2005; Taylor, 2006). In schools, certain students are identified as lacking certain characteristics and are, therefore, in need of remediation to become more normal (i.e., to display learning or behavioral characteristics more similar to their peers).

As a result, many individuals with disabilities have responded by attempting to hide or to remove characteristics of disability when possible, so as to pass as able-bodied (Brueggemann, 1997).

It is questionable if current deficit and assimilation approaches to multicultural education are benefitting those labelled as “multicultural students,” including North Korean SRB in south Korea. Several studies have shown that those identified as “*Damunwha*” (a term often used to refer to students from multicultural families in Korea) show a significantly higher rate of experiencing bullying, higher drop-out rates, and lower entrance rates to higher education institutions than their ethnic South Korean peers (Cho, 2006; Choi, 2012; Park & Woo, 2012). In addition, the incidence of multicultural students being diagnosed with a disability is much higher than that of their traditional ethnic South Korean peers. For example, researchers have found that a higher percentage of students diagnosed with a learning disability or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are from multicultural families whose spoken language at home is a language other than Korean (Goo et al., 2014; Kang, 2010). In another study, students who have a parent who is a non-native Korean speaker are more likely to be diagnosed with autism

spectrum disorder (Park & Watson, 2011). While these studies imply a strong correlation between students' multicultural backgrounds and disability, researchers have not addressed how multicultural education practices may or may not be meeting students' learning needs, and therefore have a role in positioning students to receive disability diagnoses. Societal and educational services are not provided to meet the needs of students with multicultural backgrounds, and yet multicultural students are subject to intersectional marginalization, based on identity categories including ethnicity and disability.

### **Challenges that North Korean SRB face in South Korean Society**

Considered as “multicultural students”, North Korean students who have refugee backgrounds (SRB) face similar challenges as students with multicultural identities in South Korean schools, such as bullying or higher drop-out rates (Mang et al., 2013). However, the dynamics of the challenges that North Korean SRB face differ in that North Korean SRB have unique educational and refugee experiences prior to integrating into South Korean schools and society. After a rigorous and dangerous refugee journey and upon arrival in South Korea, North Koreans are accepted as legal South Korean citizens. However, North Korean relocators face discrimination against their North Korean backgrounds. Even though North and South Koreans share the same racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, the characteristics of North Koreans (e.g., North Korean accent, lack of knowledge about South Korean society and culture, fashion) are stigmatizing in South Korean society (Yoo, 2008). Therefore, exhibiting North Korean identity markers singles them out as cultural “others” in South Korean society. Choo (2006) refers to North Koreans' stigmatizing identity markers as barriers which hinder them from being accepted as full South Korean citizens:

North Korean settlers face the constructed barrier of ethnic markers that characterize them as North Koreans and deny them full citizenship. Ethnicized citizenship has to be constructed actively in South Korea, where in the absence of underlying ethnic distinctions, these markers are created and used in the practices of othering (p. 601).

Choo's reference to the absence of "underlying ethnic distinctions" points to the lack of racial or ethnic differences—unlike individuals with multicultural identity—between North and South Koreans. And yet, North Korean relocators are still denied ethnic or cultural citizenship as South Koreans, regardless of their legal status of citizenship.

In schools, many North Korean SRB experience stigma for exhibiting North Korean identity markers (Jung, Jung, & Yang, 2006). North Korean SRB often hide their backgrounds and actively learn South Korean culture and language. Chung (2008) describes this process of becoming "normal South Korean" as undergoing a process of becoming a "cultural citizen." To become a cultural citizen, North Koreans are required to "not only understand a set of societal values, but also accept and adopt these values and cultural norms as their own" (p. 16). These norms and values often delineate middle-class norms and values, fashion and consuming power (Park, 2016). In other words, as long as North Koreans exhibit characteristics of North Koreanness, such as dress, behavior, and/or language (the use of North Korean accent) and do not accept and adopt middle-class norms and values, they will remain as cultural others. Accordingly, they take on a stigmatized identity and remain second-class citizens in South Korean society.

For North Korean SRB, the ownership of "ethnicized citizenship" works to in/exclude them from their ethnic South Korean peers in schools. By presenting the characteristics of North Koreanness, North Korean SRB are perceived as inferior to their South Korean peers (Kim, Yoo,

& Chung, 2015). In order to avoid othering and to “pass” as South Koreans, North Korean SRB tend to diligently hide or change their North Korean accent and try to adopt popular South Korean contemporary culture and fashion soon after their relocation (Chung, 2008).

North Korean SRB face another challenge as students in South Korea’s schools who are expected to fulfill what is expected of them by teachers, peers, and policy makers. In North Korea, students are expected to become a potential contributor to strengthening their communist military regime (Park, Park, & Choi, 2014). Critical thinking or autonomy is not allowed or promoted for students in schools in North Korea (although this does not mean that students do not exhibit these tendencies). In South Korea, the main educational ideology of public education is grounded in democratic ideas and a capitalist economy to foster autonomous individuals who independently plan their future in a capitalist democratic society (Park et al., 2014; Reed, 1997). The goal of public education, published by the Ministry of Education in the document, *Education in South Korea*, is illustrative of South Korea’s educational ideology:

Based on its brilliant economic growth, Korean society has devoted itself to realize a competency-based condition rather than obsolete educational backgrounds. It has discovered the talents and creativity of each student, has fostered the flexible manpower suitable for creative economic era and has devoted itself to modify its own educational system to deal with the rapidly changing demands of society (MOE, 2015, p. 19).

According to this 53-page document, the “competency-based” nature of the education system is based on a capitalist economic system, which is embedded in the educational ideology of South Korea. The goal of education is described as helping students be able to respond to a rapidly changing global economy and, in turn, become contributors to the economic growth of South Korea. In order to ensure the economic competitiveness of South Korea in the global economy,

the Ministry of Education highlights their willingness to modify the country's educational system to meet the "rapidly changing demands of society." This capitalist-driven ideology is so prominent in public education that competition in education is naturally promoted.

Within the current South Korean public education system, to meet the expectation of expected roles as "autonomous, independent, or creative" learners is not an easy task, not only for North Korean SRB but also South Korean students. North Korean SRB who used to be in a society of obedient learners, who were expected to contribute to strengthening their communist military regime, are now expected to become capable contributors to the prosperity of the nation's economy in South Korea. Despite the difficult cultural transition that North Korean SRB face, they are blamed for their poor academic and behavioral performance in schools. North Korean SRB are often conceptualized as being academically behind or slower than their South Korean peers, as well as behaviorally violent or challenging in mainstream schools (Kim, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided several examples of how individuals with minoritized identities have been excluded from mainstream society and public education in South Korea. Historically, individuals with biracial identities were not given equal opportunities to education, compared to their ethnic South Korean peers. Individuals with minoritized identities, especially those with biracial identities were denied full participation to education and communal events in South Korea, through institutionalization, segregation, and/or overseas adoption. As South Korea's demographics changed due to the recent influx of North Korean refugees, foreign workforces, and immigrants, the South Korean government created the education and welfare policies for individuals with minoritized identities to secure their communal and educational

participation. However, the pattern to exclude individuals with diverse racial, ethnic, and immigrant backgrounds from mainstream society is still ongoing.

South Korea's education system has not responded to successfully meet the needs of individuals with marginalized identities, especially North Korean SRB. Teachers hold lower expectation towards North Korean SRB in mainstream schools, and the curriculum does not reflect students' diverse cultural and educational backgrounds (Kim, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2013). Given the narrow goals of assimilationist supports, more research is needed to understand why students with refugee backgrounds struggle, and what *other* services and supports (i.e., outside of current "multicultural education") could be provided to meet the needs of North Korean SRB. Recently, private donors and religious organizations have established alternative schools to serve North Korean SRB who did not "fit" into mainstream schools. I take a critical perspective towards the existence of separate schools for educating North Korean SRB, both because such schools resemble neocolonial approaches used by protestant U.S. missionaries when they first introduced Western values into modern Korea, and because alternative schools provide a constrained choice for students that alleviates the responsibility of supporting diverse students in South Korean mainstream schools. Yet, given the apparent lack of supports offered in mainstream schools, I believe that examining practices at an alternative school could provide insights that could be adapted for mainstream schools in South Korea and beyond. In the next chapter, I discuss the qualitative research methodology and methods that I employed to examine practices and experiences at an alternative school for North Korean SRB. I discuss details of research design, including methods used for data collection and analysis. In addition, I describe detailed information about the research site for my fieldwork and participant selections.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Research Methodology and Methods**

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology of a qualitative research study that I used to examine experiences of North Korean students who have refugee backgrounds (SRB). My decision to design a qualitative study stems from a social constructionist epistemological view of refugee students; their characteristics of (dis)ability are constructed within the language, beliefs, and experiences of themselves and those around them. Further, a social constructionist perspective frames identities as constructed through power relations of specific social, cultural, and political contexts (Seidman, 2013). I used a constructionist framework to design a qualitative study aimed at making sense of the construction of (dis)ability for refugees in South Korean schools.

I begin this chapter by discussing the qualitative research methodology, including grounded theory, which provides the foundations for the design of my dissertation study. Next, I discuss qualitative research methods that I utilized to collect and analyze data for this dissertation. I explain the choice of the research site of the study, my positionality as a researcher, the research methods I employed (participant observation, interviews, and document collection), and methods of data analysis.

#### **Qualitative Methodology**

“Methodology focuses on the best means for acquiring knowledge about the world.”

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 183).

In order to determine the appropriate means for acquiring knowledge, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert that it is imperative for researchers to articulate how they understand the nature of knowledge and knowledge production. This is a central question of epistemology. The relationship between the inquirer and knowledge is an epistemological relationship, which

influences the knowledge that is produced. The modality by which the inquirer produces or constructs knowledge is their methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba, 1990). Depending on how researchers understand the nature of knowledge, they may make different choices in their methodological approaches to a study, because different methodologies (e.g., quantitative, qualitative) are indicative of different epistemological groundings.

The term qualitative research began being used widely in the field of social science in the late 1960s and in educational research in the 1980s (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In contrast to quantitative methodology grounded in positivist<sup>18</sup> and post-positivist paradigms<sup>19</sup>, qualitative research methodology has been influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism. Postmodernism rejects the positivist knowledge base that truth can be scientifically determined and emphasizes the primacy of individuality, difference, and interpretation (Seidman, 2013). Similarly, poststructuralism “rejects universal truth and emphasizes differences, deconstruction, interpretation, and the power of ideas over people’s behavior.” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 382). While differing in some respects, both poststructuralism and postmodernism are paradigms that respond critically to ideas that the world exists through a series of structures that can be understood through objective truths (Seidman, 2013). More specifically, these two world views challenge the possibility of knowing through scientific use of reason, arguing that traditional scientific inquiry only allows for a partial understanding of reality based on the perspective of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Poststructuralism and postmodernism have been used to

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<sup>18</sup> A positivist paradigm contends that legitimate knowledge and reality can be scientifically verified, measured, studied, and understood (Guba, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> A post-positivist paradigm differs from positivism through the understanding that reality cannot be fully asserted, but only approximated (Crotty, 1998). Post-positivist research attempts to verify theories to maximize our understanding of reality. Post-positivism, therefore, rejects the positivist’s assertion of being able to discern a single reality and fact which claims to be neutral as well as of scientific observation as a sole technique for its discernment.



examine how marginalized identities such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, and religion, become constructed, and to claim that any marginality is contextual and that “there is no one center” of marginality (Cho, 2013, p. 29).

Influenced by postmodern thinking, qualitative methodology focuses on knowledge of social realities, which are co-constructed by the researcher and the researched (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe the key elements of qualitative research epistemology as accepting of postmodern and poststructural values in an effort to capture the individual’s point of view by examining the constraints of everyday life, and securing rich descriptions. Therefore, qualitative research methodology enables researchers to explore and study “social life in real, naturally occurring settings; the experiencing, observing, describing, understanding and analyzing of the features of social life in concrete situations as they occur independently of scientific manipulation” (Brewer, 2000, p. 33).

Qualitative research methodology often deals with descriptive data which can allow for previously unknown voices to become known. By unknown voices, I refer to those whose perspectives are often not considered within mainstream social institutions, such as the media or in the political sphere. For silenced voices to be heard, research must provide a complex and detailed understanding of the given socio-cultural context under study. The voices of individuals can be best understood through direct and rich conversation with individuals, participant observations, or document analysis. Therefore, when examining experiences of students with refugee backgrounds as marginalized social members, qualitative research attempts to empower individuals through providing a means to sharing their perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

**Constructivist grounded theory.** Constructivist grounded theory emerged as a reaction to criticism of conventional grounded theory for following naïve inductivism and positivistic

methods (Bryant, 2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The constructivist version of grounded theory assumes that the research process as well as the studied world are socially constructed through actions constrained by historical and social conditions. While emphasizing key components of data analysis methods used in conventional grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory recognizes that the researchers take an active and vital role in the research process, particularly in developing a theory grounded in data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2005). In other words, researchers play a pivotal role in constructing a theory through interaction with data, which may be influenced by the researcher's political positions and perspectives. Constructivist grounded theorists also emphasize the role that social conditions of the research context may have of data collection and analysis (Bryant, 2002; Clarke, 2005).

In Chapters One and Two, I discussed the harsh circumstances faced by students with refugee backgrounds before and during their journey of relocation. At the same time, I designed this study with the belief that depictions about refugee students having deficits in their education and social development stemming from their refugee experience are incomplete explanations that reveal as much about the sociocultural context of their relocated society, as they do about the actual students. Constructivist grounded theory provided me a framework for critically examining how individuals with marginalized identities are constructed (i.e., portrayed and treated) within a dominant culture. Further, I understood this study as a way to examine refugees as agents in their own lives who are capable of making sense of their own experiences before and after their refugee journey. Approaching this study through a constructivist grounded theory framework, I examined the experiences of North Korean SRB before their journey to South Korea, and after arriving and enrolling at an alternative school. I also examined how teachers at an alternative school make sense of the experiences and describe the characteristics of their

students, while attempting to promote positive academic and social outcomes. Further, my qualitative approach allowed me to examine how North Korean SRB become constructed as (dis)abled through their experiences in relation to the policies, structures, and people with whom they interact within and outside of an alternative school.

### **Research Setting**

Hankook school is a secondary school located in a large city in South Korea. The school is an alternative school, meaning that it does not adhere to the nation-wide general curriculum and is not eligible to receive government funding from the Ministry of Education. In alternative schools<sup>20</sup>, curriculum development is based on the needs of students (ROK, 2017b). Hankook school was established in the early 2000s. Currently 15 teachers work at Hankook school, including a principal and vice principal. There are approximately 100 students. Students at Hankook school range from ages 14 to 26, unlike other high schools that typically serve students between ages 15 and 18. The difference in the age range is due to the fact that many students have untraditional educational backgrounds, such as a lack of formal education or experiences receiving education in multiple countries. Among 13 teachers, two teachers are from North Korea, one of whom is also a graduate of the school. The gender ratio of teachers is about equal. Hankook school also employs several part-time teachers who teach specific subjects such as art, music, English, and extra-curricular activities. The gender ratio of students reflects the gender ratio of North Koreans entering South Korea, which is about 70% female and 30% male (The Ministry of Unification, 2017a).

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<sup>20</sup> According to the Local Education Subsidy Act, alternative schools are excluded from receiving educational funding from the Ministry of Education.  
(<http://www.law.go.kr/engLsSc.do?menuId=0&subMenu=5&query=%EC%A7%80%EB%B0%A9%EA%B5%90%EC%9C%A1%EC%9E%AC%EC%A0%95%EA%B5%90%EB%B6%80%EA%B8%88%EB%B2%95#liBgcolor0>)

Hankook school was established by a collective effort of Christian organizations and individual donors. As I mentioned, Hankook school does not receive government funding from the Ministry of Education because of its “alternative” school structure. The school is run through partial funding from another branch of the federal government – the Ministry of Unification (about 40 percent of the school’s total annual budget) – as well as through donations from individuals and organizations. I developed a collaborative relationship with school leaders and then determined that it would be an appropriate research site for this study. I consulted with the school principal and vice-principal about my dissertation study and received permission to conduct research at Hankook school prior to beginning my fieldwork.

### **Positionality**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) contend that qualitative researchers have an immense responsibility when in the field; researchers need not only to document what they see in the field but also to consider their observations contextually (i.e., culturally, socially, and politically). The researcher enters their fieldwork with pre-conceived ideas about what is true. Therefore, it is impossible for qualitative researchers to completely distance themselves from their own position and deliver an authentic representation of the data. It is an ethical and methodological imperative to contemplate a researcher’s positionality and reflect about how their worldviews influence how they perceive the context of their study (Watt & Scott-Jones, 2010). My own positionality as a researcher is crucial to the analysis and implementation of this study.

My interest in studying experiences of North Korean SRB is influenced by my experiences teaching North Korean students as an elementary school teacher in South Korea. I also became interested in North Korean SRB because of the work of my late mother who was deeply involved in missionary work to rescue North Korean refugees in China. Because of my

mother, I was aware of the dangerous conditions that many North Korean escapees experience through multiple border crossings. My initial assumption held before entering the research site was that North Korean refugees must have developed a strong mentality or resilience through their rigorous journey of relocation. Another assumption I held was that language differences between the North and South Koreans were minimal. Soon after I entered the research site, I realized how this assumption about language differences was mistaken. For example, despite speaking the same language, I sometimes did not fully understand the vocabulary used by North Korean students, nor their spoken language due to differences in our accents and use of terminologies. As I will discuss in this study, the language difference was in fact a significant challenge for many North Korean SRB, recent North Korean relocators in particular, as they were positioned as a linguistic minority in South Korean society.

While at Hankook School, I was simultaneously an outsider and insider. I am a native South Korean woman and a former elementary school teacher. I am also a Christian and able-bodied person. As a native South Korean, I had the privilege of a common linguistic and cultural background that allowed me to build relationships with the teachers at Hankook school and gain access to the school for this study. Because of my religious background as a Christian, I felt I understood the culture of the school and its mission, which was rooted in Christian values. I also had a certain degree of familiarity with the school system and curriculum at Hankook school because of my teaching background in South Korea. However, I was surprised at the extensive workload that teachers at the school handled compared to teachers in mainstream schools, such as the school I taught at a decade ago. Further, when interacting with students in the school, I realized that I was suddenly put in the position of being the linguistic and cultural minority. As I entered and left the research site, I recognized that there was much that I did not know and would

never know. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that my documentation of school culture, practices and structures, and interactions between teachers and students is subject to my own interpretations while in the field.

### **Data Collection**

My fieldwork consisted of two periods of data collection: 1) three months in the summer of 2017, and 2) one month in the winter of 2017. The total time spent in the field is equivalent to one academic semester at Hankook school. During the first data collection period, I focused on developing relationships with teachers, students, and school staff members. I also conducted participant observations and interviews. During the second data collection period, I conducted follow-up interviews with students and teachers and continued participant observations. The two different trips to Hankook school allowed me to be able to observe and participate in different major school events. To capture what I observed and contemplated as a researcher in the field, I kept thorough field notes during the data collection process. This account included what I, as the researcher, experienced, observed, and reflected upon in the course of collecting the data (Palmer, 2010). Participant observations, in particular, rely heavily on field notes in order to create comprehensive and rich data regarding the researcher's experience with participants. During and after each observation and interview, I recorded details, such as my reactions and reflections of my role as a researcher. Through keeping thorough field notes during the data collection process, I documented dynamics between different stake holders in the school, as well as my own positionality.

### **Methods**

**Participant observation.** The term “participant observation” refers to a qualitative data collection method, which involves “getting close to the lives of individuals by carrying out

observations while participating in their everyday lives” (Schostak, 2002, p. 75). Participant observation is a commonly used method in research on refugee education because participant observation allows researchers to closely engage with participants as a means to gain an understanding of how they are situated in a given cultural context (see Bačáková, 2011; Mareng, 2010; Oikonomidou, 2010). Yet, when conducting participant observations in qualitative research, researchers acknowledge a gap in the relationship between themselves and the participants being studied. Researchers try to ameliorate this gap by becoming a part of the context in which participants live and work (Creswell, 2007). In order to minimize the distance between myself (researcher) and participants during participant observations, I spent as much time as possible with teachers and students at Hankook school. I stayed in the school from morning to the end of the day. During my time there, I participated in various school events including field trips, weekly student assemblies, worship services, sports events, and school events, such as a school-wide English speech contest. Daily lunch time was particularly important for me to get to know a wide range of students and teachers. While having lunch together, I was able to connect with different students every day, which helped me develop closer relationships with several students. In addition to participating in regular school events, I volunteered as an afterschool program teacher, teaching English to several students. Through this opportunity, I was able to work closely with students and teachers, which allowed me to be able to observe interactions between students and teachers, including their daily activities at the school.

Brewer (2000) claims that conducting participant observations cannot be simple or quick because researchers need to successfully re-socialize into the context of their study. This involves the researcher taking on a new role and having a commitment to developing meaningful

relationships with the participants. In the beginning of the first round of data collection, I encountered challenges of re-socializing and being accepted by teachers and students at the school. I felt that I was perceived as an outsider to those in the school and that I was not immediately accepted as a member of the community. During my time at school, I often helped teachers with their tasks, including working with individual students. For example, the annual school-wide English speech contest was planned to take place a few weeks after I arrived at the school. I volunteered to meet with students participating in the contest and provide them with one-on-one support during recesses and after school. These meetings had two benefits. First, I was able to get to know each student individually. Second, teachers expressed appreciation for the hours that I spent at the school helping students. I found that students and teachers began to more frequently approach me to talk about life in and outside of school. Gradually, I found that I was accepted into the school community and was able to develop meaningful relationships with teachers, students, and staff members at the school. Based on the trust that I developed with teachers, a few allowed me to observe their classes. I observed several classes with different subjects, including Korean Language Arts, Korean History, Art, and Social Studies in different grades. I would not have been able to conduct classroom observations without the trust that the teachers and I collectively developed over time at Hankook school.

**Participant selection and interviews.** Interviewing is the most commonly used data collection method used in qualitative studies of refugee education (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010; George, 2013; Hurley et al., 2014; Mosselson, 2006; Naidoo, 2015). In my dissertation study, interviewing was a crucial research method for data collection because the insights of the participants are the core of the data in my dissertation project.



During my fieldwork, I conducted a total of 21 semi-structured interviews with six students (four female students and two male students) and nine teachers (five female teachers and four male teachers), two of which are also school leaders (see Appendix A, B, & C for interview protocols). To identify potential interview participants and refine my interview protocols, I had several informal conversations with students and teachers in earlier stages of the research. These conversations allowed me to ask potential participants about their interest in this study in a more naturalistic way. Writing field notes was helpful in terms of identifying potential interview participants for semi-structured interviews. All of the teachers and students that I recruited agreed to participate in the interview. I conducted the first round of semi-structured interviews with 15 participants at the end of my first field work. Then, I conducted six more follow-up interviews during my second trip to Hankook School. Each semi-structured interview lasted between one hour to two and a half hours. Through multiple interviews, I was able to have in-depth conversations with participants.

Student participant recruitment criteria included: 1) having been enrolled in Hankook school more than one year, and 2) having a refugee background which included coming originally from North Korea. All six student participants had schooling experience in North Korea. Five of the student participants attended mainstream schools after their relocation to South Korea before coming to Hankook school and one student did not have prior schooling experience in South Korea before Hankook school. The average time spent in mainstream schools among five participants is approximately four years. During semi-structured interviews, I purposefully included questions related to students' previous mainstream schooling experiences in South Korea prior to Hankook school (see Appendix B). Given the focus of my second research question on students' experiences in South Korean schools—instead of only Hankook

school—I wanted to understand how students reflect on their previous schooling experience and make comparison between Hankook school and mainstream schools.

Five out of six student participants were seniors at Hankook school. The reason for having a majority of student participants be seniors is due to their history of schooling in Hankook school. Several students with whom I made connections, who were not seniors, tended to have a shorter period of time attending Hankook school. I focused my efforts on recruiting students who had more experience at Hankook school. As a result, I ended up recruiting more seniors than students from other grades. The average time that student participants spent at Hankook school was two years and four months.

For teacher participants, I recruited teachers from different disciplines and those with varied years of teaching experiences at Hankook school. Teacher participant recruitment criteria included: 1) having worked at Hankook school more than two years, and 2) being a full-time teacher. When recruiting interview participants, I intentionally asked two teachers who were from North Korea because I believed they would provide insights that would not be offered by other teachers.

I kept thorough field notes after each semi-structured interview. Field notes are an important source of supplemental data during interviews because they allow researchers to capture the context and certain meanings of utterances that might not be captured through audio-recordings of a conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During and after every interview, I documented unspoken signs, such as facial expressions, gestures, or other types of body language in the field notes. Using field notes, I identified reoccurring themes and reflected on my interview skills as well as developed further follow-up interview questions. I conducted all the

interviews in Korean, the native language of all the participants and myself. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then de-identified.

In order to insure the accuracy of the interview data, I shared my transcribed interview data with each participant. I invited participants to read the transcribed interview data and correct or clarify any parts of our conversation, if there was any misinterpretation. By doing so, I was able to ensure not only the accuracy of the data but also the involvement of the participants in this study. The following table includes details of the student and teacher interview participants. All names are pseudonyms. I included a brief background about students' prior education and teachers' prior teaching experiences (Tables 1 & 2). I removed all identifiable data including local or regional locations mentioned during the interview, or I used pseudonyms (e.g., for names of regions/cities in North Korea).



**Documents.** Documents are important to qualitative researchers to triangulate data sources or to fill in gaps when researchers are unable to directly observe phenomena (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). To triangulate data and create links between data collected through interviews and participant observations, I utilized public documents that Hankook school published, such as monthly newsletters, school curricula, statements of educational philosophy, school policies, and textbooks. All documents, except for textbooks, were publicly available through the school website. I collected monthly newsletters from September 2015 to January 2018. Newsletters included school events and student activities that took place each month. Through these documents, I became more familiar with the school's history as well as events and activities in which students participated for the last three years.

In addition to public documents publicized on the school's website, I also collected textbooks. Teachers at Hankook school created a class entitled "Introduction to a new society I & II," which is unique to this school. Because of the huge difference in curriculum and knowledge taught in North and South Korean schools, many North Korean SRB find it difficult to adjust to South Korean schools and society. Among many subjects, Korean Language Arts, Social Studies, and Korean History are particularly different between North and South Korea's education system. Hankook school teachers collaborated to create a course that would bridge this educational gap as well as allow students to compare and contrast the differences between the two societies. With permission from the school, I included both volumes of these textbooks as data collection.

In summary, the data set for this study included 21 interviews, totaling 28 hours of audio-recorded interview data. I transcribed each interview, which yielded 492 double-spaced pages of interview data. In addition to interview data, I wrote 153 pages of field notes and collected 392

pages of documents. I also conducted 23 formal observations, in addition to countless informal observations that were captured by field notes. After transcribing interviews, I removed all identifying information, assigned pseudonyms, and destroyed/erased all audio files.

### **Data Analysis**

I started the data analysis process by utilizing multiple stages of coding, such as initial color coding, substantive, and theoretical coding. Coding refers to “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Codes are used to compare, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data, enabling researchers to scrutinize and interact with the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During my data collection process, I simultaneously coded data from field notes, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents that I collected. Once I initially coded data, I refined and compared codes to one another to address discrepancies or redundancies. I then categorized these codes into groups based on common themes. The initial organizing themes in my data analysis included socioeconomic status, identity crisis, language issues, physical and mental health, refugee experiences, different school culture and expectations, educational experiences, and teacher supports.

During the early stage of analytic process, I continually kept memos of emerging themes and questions. Memo writing is a substantial component of a qualitative data analysis process because it helps the researcher keep an analytic distance from generated codes as well as increase the level of abstraction of their ideas. Charmaz (2006) emphasizes memoing as the pivotal intermediate step between coding and writing. During my coding process, I purposefully used analytic memos, such as posing new questions, ideas, and thoughts about emerging codes, as well as considering the relationships between codes. Using analytic memos helped me sort,

create, and refine theoretical relationships between data and the theoretical framework that I grounded on this study (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013).

I initially tried to use NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, for my data analysis. After my first trial of data analysis with NVivo, I learned that NVivo is not an ideal tool for analyzing qualitative data that was written in Korean language. The features and programs that were embedded to effectively code qualitative data in NVivo were not applicable for data written in Korean language. After a few trials, I concluded that using NVivo would not give me as effective or accurate result of data analysis. Therefore, I switched to code and analyzed my data manually by reading through the written data and highlighting patterns. I identified 27 codes from the data from 21 interviews, observation and field notes, and other supplementary documents. Then, I organized the patterns in a bulletin board according to the emerging themes and continued arranging and rearranging the themes through multiple rounds of coding.

After the initial coding, I revisited my color-coded themes and narrowed these themes into three major themes: 1) challenges faced by North Korean SRB in South Korea, 2) embodying disability, and 3) approaches to teaching North Korean SRB. Each major theme comprised several sub-themes. Throughout my data analysis process, I simultaneously revisited my memos and coded data to make sure that my data analysis aligned with the original data.

**Grounded theory analysis.** After the categorization of the data, I utilized the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) to formalize my procedures for data analysis. Grounded theory refers to a method of inquiry as well as the product of research inquiry. It is more commonly used to refer to a specific mode of analysis in qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2005). A key element of grounded theory is analytic phases that occur simultaneously with data collection; the data collection and analysis inform each other in an ongoing process. Charmaz

(2005) describes the successive process of the data analysis procedure as, “a set of guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development” (p. 507). I benefitted from following the successive process of the data analysis procedure because my data collection was divided into two phases. The time between the two periods of my field work allowed me time to compare my initial data. For example, before I made my second trip to South Korea, I concluded my initial data analysis with the data that I collected from my first field work. Therefore, I had an understanding of what was missing and needed to be included during the second phase of my data collection. Based on my initial data analysis, I was able to plan six more follow-up interviews with three students and three teachers.

After my second trip to South Korea, I conducted another set of data coding and analysis. I identified common elements, then grouped those elements together into initial codes. I compared and contrasted each code to identify additional themes and patterns. Using analytic strategies in grounded theory that are interactive and comparative, I made systematic comparisons between data with the intent of actively building a new theory that emerged by the end of the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I followed the inductive process of developing theories based on interview data, formal observation notes, field notes, and documents which afforded me the opportunity to deliver the voices of participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Language and ethical considerations.** As a native Korean speaker with advanced English language proficiency, I conducted research using both Korean and English. All interviews were conducted in Korean language, and field notes and observation notes were written in both Korean and English. Most of the data that I collected were documented in Korean



language, except for my field notes and formal observation notes. I conducted data analysis with raw data without translating them into English. After I finished data analysis, I translated the result of the data into English for the purpose of writing up findings of this study.

As a researcher as well as a translator of the data of my dissertation study, I am aware of the important role of translation in research. Translation may add to, eliminate, or change the meaning of interview data (Larkin, de Casterlé, & Schotsmans, 2007). To try to negate this problem, I examined my positionality as a researcher as well as a translator throughout my dissertation project. In addition, during the data analysis and translation process, I consulted with Dr. Eunjung Kim, a member of my dissertation committee and a native Korean speaker, to check for accuracy. Although I can never claim to deliver the full authenticity of my participants' experiences, I ensured my participants were closely involved in my dissertation project through member checks and continued conversations. Prior to my field work, the ethics and procedures of my dissertation project were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have highlighted the qualitative research methodology and methods that I used to examine the lives of a marginalized group. I have asserted that qualitative research as well as grounded theory were ideal methodological grounds for this study. Qualitative methodology and constructivist grounded theory allowed me to examine the experiences of North Korean SRB, as well as the ways that educators interpret and respond to the characteristics of cultural and ethnic minority students, specifically North Korean SRB in South Korea. Over the next three chapters, I report the results of this study, beginning with sociopolitical aspects of the identity of North Korean SRB in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Socio-political Aspects of Refugee Identity**

In this chapter, I present analysis of findings that are intended to answer the first research question of this study: how do North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) describe their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee backgrounds and relocation to South Korean society? To answer this question, I analyzed interview transcripts of six students at Hankook school, who often described how their understanding about their identity shifted as they relocated to different societies. While students' voices are the primary focus of this chapter, I also occasionally include data from interviews with teachers and school leaders as well as my field notes, which helps to provide some context or elaboration on the experiences of the students. I identified two themes in the ways that participants described their experiences: 1) shifting social and political identities, and 2) navigating through different educational systems. The first theme consisted of data related to the following sub-themes: shift in legal status as refugees, shift in socioeconomic status in South Korea, becoming a linguistic minority, becoming a multicultural student, acquiring a stigmatized identity, and adapting to the privilege of being South Korean. In the second theme, I included data related to the following sub-themes which describe aspects of participants' experiences navigating through different educational systems: increased access to formal and free education in South Korea, limited opportunities for minority students, and adjusting to different goals and expectations.

When describing their experiences, participants often shared how people around them viewed and treated them, beginning when they were living in North Korea, then as a refugee in one or more countries, and finally as a South Korean citizen. Students also reported that their gender, age, social status, and citizenship played an important role in the challenges they faced

during their refugee journey, as well as after their relocation to South Korea. In many cases, the themes above relate to challenging experiences, while others describe opportunities that were afforded to participants as a result of their refugee journey. The wide range of students' experiences include differences in their education, refugee journey, and socioeconomic status of their family. I attempt to account for differences in, for example, the extent to which some students found transition to South Korean schools and society easier than others.

My focus on reporting experiences of students across multiple contexts is a result of the questions I asked participants, and the theoretical and analytical frameworks of this study. I understand identities as gaining significance through the social and political landscape of a given context, which demonstrates the multidimensional aspects of identity that intersect to support or deny meaningful participation of individuals in society. Further, I understand (dis)ability to be constructed in relation to specific contexts, rather than through experiences in an amorphous sense (Annamma et al., 2013). Finally, the constructivist grounded theory to this study influenced me to consider how the experiences of individual participants were constructed within specific social conditions that only sometimes overlapped (Charmaz, 2005).

### **Shifting Social and Political Identities**

One of the main themes that emerged in my data analysis was related to the shift in socio-political identities of North Korean SRB during and after their refugee experience. Student participants reported that they faced challenges while experiencing changes in their social status. As illegal residents as well as linguistic and cultural minorities in China, student participants faced various forms of discrimination. Many students reported feeling helpless, lacking access to resources, and experiencing low self-esteem and/or discrimination. At the same time, upon arrival in South Korea, North Korean SRB reported gaining opportunities that they did not have

prior to relocation, such as access to free education and security related to their legal status. In this section, I describe the experiences that students described related to North Korean refugee status within different contexts as they relocated to South Korea. I also discuss how students were afforded access to different opportunities (i.e., free education or social welfare benefits) as they moved across borders.

**A shift in legal status as refugees.** After leaving their home country, North Korean refugees often face a threat to their wellbeing as undocumented residents in China. Jung, a 19-year-old senior at Hankook school, described his struggles related to his legal and social status as a refugee in China. After escaping from North Korea, Jung and his mother spent five years in China. Like many female North Korean refugees, Jung's mother was sold by human traffickers to marry a Chinese man. Living with his Chinese stepfather, Jung and his mother had to hide their status and identity as North Korean refugees because of fear of deportation to their homeland. Jung recalled experiencing a series of threats, abuses, and discrimination during his time in China:

The reality that I faced in China was totally different from what I imagined [it would be while] in North Korea. The only difference between living in China and North Korea was that I could eat as much as I wanted. Nothing else was different other than that. I was bullied by other kids in town. Older people, like adults, also beat me up. They degraded me so badly because I was from North Korea. "This is not your country. You don't belong here. You will be deported to North Korea if we call the police. You can't do anything here."

Without legal citizenship or language skills, Jung's social position had drastically changed as a refugee who had to hide his status and identity in China. The ability to speak the Chinese

language is not just a means of communication but a survival strategy for many North Korean refugees in China because language is the most obvious determinant of identifying someone as a non-Chinese citizen. Being able to speak fluent Chinese is therefore essential for many North Korean refugees in order to avoid deportation. To avoid bullying from people in town and to learn the Chinese language, Jung stayed at home all day spending time watching TV:

In the beginning of my stay in China, I stayed at home all day watching TV to learn Chinese language, every day. I have no idea how I was able to do it at that time. I only thought about the possibility of being arrested by Chinese police officers if I don't speak Chinese. As time went by, I was able to communicate in Chinese.

Although Jung came to speak and understand the Chinese language, his situation did not change much because he still sounded like a foreigner when speaking Chinese. Instead, he came to better understand why other kids bullied him.

Jung's social position as a North Korean refugee also affected the way he exhibited his characteristics and personality. Back in North Korea, Jung reported he was the strongest and most mischievous boy in town and used to bully other kids. Jung described his shift from being a bully, to being bullied, during his time in China:

My personality didn't change. Why would it? I could've beaten them up easily, but I didn't because of my mom. I didn't care if I got arrested for beating up other kids, but I couldn't let my mom be arrested because of me. Coming home after being bullied by other kids, I would punch the wall in the house with my fist to break my bones. So I had to restrain myself.

Like Jung, many North Korean refugees in China experience similar situations where they have to hide their status as refugees in fear of deportation. Jung explained that his mother was "sold"

for less money than single female refugees because Chinese men preferred having a single woman as their wife rather than a woman with a child. Jung compared his mother to a “commodity” and used terms such as “being sold,” “traded,” “expensive,” and “cheap” when describing the situations that his mother and he experienced as refugees. Even though local people living in the same village as Jung knew that Jung and his mother were North Korean refugees, they did not report their status to the Chinese authorities because North Korean female wives were often considered as “property” of Chinese men. While living in China for five years, Jung and his mother had to live with being surveilled by both local people and the Chinese authorities.

A 22-year-old freshman at Hankook school, Moon’s experiences as a refugee in China were very different from Jung’s. Moon crossed the border to China with his mother when he was 11 years old and stayed in China for 10 years. Like Jung’s mother, Moon’s mother was also sold to a Chinese man after escaping from North Korea. Living in China, Moon never went to school. However, he was able to pick up the Chinese language (Mandarin Chinese) quickly and became fluent, as if he was native Chinese. Because of his language acquisition, he was able to pass as a “normal” Chinese person, not worrying about whether his status as a North Korean refugee would be revealed. As Moon was getting older, even his close friends did not believe that he was originally from North Korea:

No one believed that I was from North Korea, even my close friends, because I spoke [Mandarin] Chinese like a native. In the beginning of my stay in China, I lived in a rural area. After living there for one and a half years, I became fluent in Chinese.

As Moon became fluent in Chinese, he left his stepfather’s home and lived independently, working several jobs and making money. A few years after Moon started working, he and his

mother were able to buy fake identification cards through the black market. Moon explained the process of purchasing an identification card and the benefits of possessing identification cards when they were stopped by police officers in China:

Moon: Around the time of the Beijing Olympics [2008], my mom and I bought identification cards. When police officers stopped us to check our identification, we proudly showed our identification cards.

Song: Does it [identification card] look like a real one?

Moon: It is a real one! It's not something fake. It is a real one!

Song: But you are not Chinese. How did you get a real identification card?

Moon: You can do anything in China, if you have money. My Chinese friends told me that China is a nice place to live as long as you have money.

Unlike many North Korean refugees in China, Moon was able to afford purchasing an identification card that was illegally traded. In addition, his excellent Chinese language proficiency helped him easily pass as a Chinese citizen. In contrast, Jung did not have the language skills or financial resources to allow him to pass as Chinese, which created immense pressure on him to hide his identity by avoiding people and public spaces.

**A shift in socioeconomic status in South Korea.** Among the student participants, those who previously had higher socioeconomic status in North Korea often described feeling helpless and experiencing stress after relocating to South Korea as a result of class shift. M.J., who relocated to South Korea at age 11, described the drastic shift in socioeconomic status she experienced before and after relocation. In North Korea, M.J. reported having relatively affluent living conditions and social status. In elementary school, M.J. spoke of being popular among her peers and recognized as one of the top five smartest students in her school. However, her life in

South Korea was drastically different and in some ways was a loss of this prior status. M.J. described the realities that she faced in moving from North to South Korea:

My family was rich [in North Korea] because my dad had some land and my relatives who moved to South Korea sent us money. My friends tried to be friends with me because I was a smart student. However, everything totally changed after we came to South Korea. My parents were busy working, so they couldn't pay attention to me. In school, I became isolated and bullied by other kids because of my different [North Korean] accent. In the first exam that I took in South Korea, I was ranked 30<sup>th</sup> in my class. I was speechless when I saw my report card.

Known as one of the most high-achieving and popular students, M.J. had pride in her academic identity while attending a North Korean school. However, M.J. had a more difficult time understanding her shifting identity after relocating to South Korea. She fell behind her South Korean peers academically. Furthermore, her background as a North Korean refugee became a reason for peers to bully her in school.

The fact that M.J.'s parents were not able to afford affluent living conditions after relocating to South Korea added another layer of stress. Unlike when living in North Korea, M.J. felt she did not receive enough support from her parents, who had to work and manage a new life in South Korea. Currently, many North Koreans rely on their family members who relocated to South Korea for financial support because the nation's Public Distribution System (PDS<sup>21</sup>) has collapsed (Ministry of Unification, 2017a). As North Korean refugees settle in South Korea, they

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<sup>21</sup> The Public Distribution System (PDS) was previously the major source for food as well as a central means of political and economic control for North Koreans until the nationwide famine struck most of North Korea between 1994 and 1998 (Haggard & Noland, 2007). The collapse of PDS resulted in fundamental changes to the social and economic system in North Korea; each household had to develop a variety of coping strategies to be self-sufficient. The nation-wide famine and the collapse of PDS also resulted in a growing number of North Koreans who escaped their homeland and relocated to South Korea in search of an adequate standard of living (Ministry of Unification, 2017a).



start to send money to support their family members remaining in North Korea. Those with financial support from family members in South Korea, like M.J.'s family, are able to maintain comparatively affluent living conditions, which enables them to afford better education and medical services in North Korea.

Another student participant reported her frustration coming from experiencing a decrease in her family's socioeconomic status after relocating to South Korea. Mi, a 21-year-old senior, is from a family who ran a business selling oriental medicine in North Korea. Because her family business was successful, Mi was able to sustain an upper middle-class life in North Korea. She described that her self-esteem and understanding about her identity were strongly related to her socioeconomic status. Mi reported struggling to discover her identity in a new society:

We were rich [in North Korea]. My dad and grandma ran a business selling oriental medicines in Pyongyang. Since the business was successful, we made a lot of money. So, I felt very confident with myself and so did my family. One day in school, I was surprised to find out that my peers didn't know what shampoo was, while I had been using shampoo and conditioner... Some say that people can be happy when they have freedom. But I don't think so. When we feel superior to others, I think, we feel confident and good about ourselves. Since I came to South Korea, I've never felt that way. So, it's been very hard for me [to feel confident about myself].

Mi's parents used to run a business in North Korea, which afforded them affluent living conditions and a higher socioeconomic status. Although it seems strange that one can run a business in a country that claims economic and social equality based on socialism, the current underground economy<sup>22</sup> is driven by capitalist economic rules, creating many individual

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<sup>22</sup> As a result of the nation-wide famine, the collapse of PDS, and the U.S. economic sanctions against North Korea, underground markets naturally formed to distribute food and other commodities to North Koreans, which became

entrepreneurs. Therefore, there were several students at Hankook school who had upper-middle class living conditions in North Korea, including Mi.

In M.J. and Mi's anecdotes, they both noted that their own self-esteem was strongly related to their socioeconomic status within a society. Currently, most North Korean newcomers, like many immigrant workers and refugees from other countries, occupy a low social class associated with the types of working-class jobs they have access to in South Korean society (Chung, 2008; Yoo, 2008). Even though North Korean newcomers are provided with free housing and start-up funds upon arrival, they still experience drastic changes in their social positions. For example, Mi's father who used to run his own business in North Korea is now working as a security guard in an apartment complex, which is known as one of the most stressful jobs with minimum wage in South Korea (Kim, In, Nam, & Kang, 2015). Mi was also working part time outside of school to support her father to pay bills. Witnessing their parents struggling with managing a new life from scratch in South Korean society, both Mi and M.J. expressed having low self-esteem and lack of confidence about themselves. Low self-esteem and lack of confidence affected both young women; they had difficulty understanding themselves as capable and confident people in their new schools and communities as a result of the change in their social class standing. As I discuss later, other students who were from a lower social class in North Korea did not share the same disorienting experience of shifting social class, as M.J. and Mi did.

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the major source of nourishing North Korean citizens (KINU, 2017; Shin, Choi, & Novotny, 2009). Although it is not legally allowed, many North Koreans run small businesses selling foods or commodities brought from China through underground markets. Since the emergence of underground market and marketization, one's economic capital and affordability of commodities became one of the determinants of one's socioeconomic status in North Korea.

**North Koreans as linguistic minority in South Korea.** Once North Korean refugees arrive in South Korea and successfully complete an intensive background check, they receive South Korean citizenship (Ministry of Unification, 2017b). Therefore, North Koreans are no longer undocumented residents or refugees in South Korea. However, many North Koreans still remain linguistic minorities in South Korean society because of a disparity in how Korean language is spoken between North and South Korea. Over a half century of political division has resulted in significant differences in terminology and expressions. New concepts and terminologies were introduced from Western societies to South Korea, and South Koreans have directly adopted many English words. For example, the Korean word for tunnel in South Korean is *teoneol*, a word borrowed from English. However, in North Korea, the Korean word for tunnel is *chang-gul* (Ministry of Unification, 2018). Instead of directly adopting English words, new terms are created based on the Korean language system in North Korea. For newly arrived North Korean refugees, understanding words and expressions directly adopted from English is a great challenge. In addition, a lack of contemporary cultural references used in South Korean society adds another layer of linguistic challenge for North Korean refugees, who despite speaking Korean, are nonetheless a linguistic minority.

When I began planning my dissertation study, I was not fully aware of the significance of language differences between North and South Korea. I assumed that differences between the North and South Korean languages, such as different accents and terminologies, would not be as significant as they were. Through my field work and interviews, I realized that language differences between the two societies created much greater challenges for many North Korean SRB than I had anticipated, positioning them as linguistic minorities in South Korean society. Many North Korean SRB I interviewed expressed their frustration about having to learn

contemporary South Korean language and culture in order to fully understand conversations. For Jung, learning the different uses of the Korean language in South Korea was one of the biggest challenges that he faced. Jung estimated that, based on his experience, 30 percent of contemporary South Korean language seems to be comprised of English-based foreign words. For many North Korean SRB who are not exposed to Western culture or English before their relocation to South Korea, contemporary South Korean language is something that they have to intentionally learn. Jung explained how he taught himself contemporary South Korean language since his relocation in 2012:

Let's say, you used an English word during our conversation now. Then, I memorize that English word in my head. I would pretend that I understand that word because I feel embarrassed to say that I don't know the word. Later on, after the conversation, I would check the word on the internet, then finally understand what that word meant. For example, when I have a training, my coach would say "*men-tal* [mental], *ma-in-deu* [mind] is important." Then I think, 'What is *men-tal*? What is *ma-in-deu* [mind]?' I didn't even know such simple words. In North Korea, we don't speak like that. I didn't know such differences in North and South Korean language at all when I first came to South Korea. I am still learning and it's a lot better now.

As Jung observed, learning the South Korean language and culture is an ongoing process for many North Korean SRB. Since I became aware of the challenges that students at Hankook school experienced understanding contemporary Korean language in South Korea, I tried to be more cautious about the use of terminologies when speaking with students. The conversations with students also helped me critically reflect on assumptions that I held about Korean language.

Unlike Jung, some student participants found the transition to South Korea relatively easier than others because they were exposed to South Korean culture and language prior to their relocation. Sue, a 22-year-old senior at Hankook school, described her refugee experience in China, which allowed her to get accustomed to South Korean contemporary culture and language. After crossing the border at the age of ten, Sue spent a year in China, living with her aunt who left North Korea years before Sue. Sue's aunt was working at a guest house in a city in China where many Korean-Chinese people reside. Much of the Korean-Chinese population in the city subscribed to South Korean TV shows. Therefore, Sue could watch a number of South Korean TV shows while living in China. She also interacted with South Korean tourists who stayed at the guest house. This experience helped her learn South Korean culture and contemporary language. Sue recalled how her experience in China allowed her to easily transition to the South Korean language and culture, compared to many other newly arrived North Korean SRB:

I got to talk to South Korean travelers at the guest house. That [watching Korean TV shows and interacting with South Korean travelers] helped me to get accustomed to South Korean culture. It also helped me to change my North Korean accent. Because of the time in China, I was able to easily keep up with conversations with my friends that I met in South Korea, because I understood cultural references.

Using a North Korean accent is an immediate marker of one's North Korean background. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, having a North Korean accent is associated with a stigmatized identity in South Korean society. Sue changed her accent relatively easily and quickly because of her refugee experience in China. Yet, not every North Korean SRB has prior experiences like Sue. Some North Korean SRB found that adopting a South Korean accent was difficult even

after living for several years in South Korea. Therefore, many North Korean SRB try to change their accent to South Korean to avoid stigmatization.

**Multicultural students: An imposed identity for North Korean SRB.** The South Korean Ministry of Unification asserts that North Korean SRB should not be considered as multicultural students because North Korea is not considered a foreign country under the law (Ministry of Unification, 2017b). However, in schools, teachers often view North Korean SRB as those with multicultural family backgrounds (Jung, Kang, & Jang, 2014). School teachers often categorize students with multicultural family backgrounds as those who need multicultural education services, and North Korean SRB are often viewed as multicultural students because of their different background from majority South Korean students. Mi, a 21-year-old senior, shared her experience of how she was considered a multicultural student by her teacher when she first attended a mainstream South Korean school. One day, her teacher tried to label Mi as a multicultural student, even though Mi did not identify herself as having a multicultural family background:

Mi: When I first attended South Korean school, my teacher asked me if she can classify me as...um...what do you call it? Those who are immigrated from, like Thailand or somewhere. Yes, *Damunwha* [Multi-culture]! She asked me if she can classify me as a *Damunwha*. So, I said yes. I didn't even know what that meant. After school, I thought about it for a while and then wondered if I really was a *Damunwha*.

Song: What do you think multicultural kids are? Someone from different racial backgrounds?

Mi: Yes, foreigners with a different race than Korean. I am the *same* [emphasis added] Korean, from North Korea. Why did my teacher treat me like a multicultural kid? I

thought that was strange. I was thinking if I needed to talk to my teacher about it, but then I decided not to.

Mi's experience in a mainstream school is indicative of how current approaches to multicultural education often function to single out students with multicultural family backgrounds from their ethnic South Korean peers, which I discuss in Chapter Two. Mi had a firm understanding about her identity being the *same* Korean as her peers. Yet, the current practice of labeling students as "multicultural" ultimately results in separation between ethnic South Korean students and multicultural minority groups (e.g., North Korean SRB, biracial children, children of foreign or immigrant workers) whose characteristics are often associated with negative stigma in South Korean society.

**Stigmatized identity as North Korean SRB in South Korea.** North Korean SRB often experience discrimination and mistreatment because of stigma associated with their North Korean identity. Several students at Hankook school reported that they are aware of negative stigma associated with their North Korean identity in South Korea, and a few of them experienced bullying or discrimination because of characteristics that they exhibited as North Korean (e.g., using North Korean accent, clothing style, and a shorter and thinner body figure compared to South Korean peers). M.J. shared her experience of being bullied by her peers, when she first attended a South Korean school, "As soon as I came to South Korea, I was placed in an elementary school in 4th grade. There, I was bullied by my peers in school because I was North Korean." As a newcomer to South Korea, her North Korean accent, clothing style, and other identity markers sometimes became a reason to be bullied by peers.

Stigma towards North Korean refugees in South Korean society is related to North Korea's economic situation and the current political tension within the Korean peninsula. In

South Korea, North Korean refugees are often regarded as either those who: 1) suffered from extreme poverty, 2) betrayed the North Korean regime and/or, 3) are a burden to the South Korean government (Yoo, 2008; Chung, 2008; Cho, 2014). By disclosing their backgrounds, North Korean refugees are often pitied as people who fled their homeland because of extreme poverty, the need to search for food, and the desire for freedom. In addition, North Korean relocators in South Korea are often targets of harsh criticism whenever political conflicts arise between North and South Korea, as if they are considered the representatives of the North Korean regime (Mang et al., 2013). This public discourse around North Koreans builds an even more negative image and stigma about characteristics of North Koreans. Therefore, stigma associated with their characteristics and identity—often stemming from a combination of media, political, and cultural discourse—becomes a burden for North Korean SRB who wish to disclose their identity in South Korean schools and society at large.

***Survival strategies as North Korean SRB in South Korea.*** As discussed earlier, many North Korean SRB experience discrimination against their identity in South Korea. Several students at Hankook school reported strategies that they use as a means to avoid discrimination associated with their North Korean identity. Sue, a 22-year-old senior at Hankook school, shared with me her experience of dealing with prejudice against North Koreans. Sue believed that it was unfair to be treated differently because of her background as a North Korean refugee. Thus, Sue openly spoke about her identity as a North Korean refugee when she met new friends in South Korean schools:

In my opinion, it is not fair to feel like and act like I am inferior to South Koreans only because I am from North Korea. We [both North and South Koreans] share the same heritage and race. My mom told me that “it is not your fault that you were born in North



Korea. It is actually better for you that you were born in North Korea because you have experienced many different things that South Korean kids cannot. You should feel confident with yourself.” So, when I made new friends, I always told them that I was from North Korea. My friend got surprised at first because from their understanding, North Korean kids are supposed to be skinny and have darker skin color, and use a North Korean accent. But I was pretty chubby when I was younger. When I, a chubby girl, told them that I was from North Korea, my friends went, “stop kidding me!” I really enjoyed the moment of making my South Korean friends surprised with my background. I thought to myself, I will change your prejudice and stereotypes about North Koreans.

Sue did not have to deal with prejudice against her identity as much as her peers at Hankook school because she did not have typical North Korean identity markers. It was easy for Sue to pass as South Korean. Disclosing her North Korean refugee identity could become a moment in which she had more control over the situation and could deliberately educate her friends about their stereotypes of North Korean refugees. Sue’s mother also helped her establish a positive understanding about her identity.

However, many young North Korean SRB who have more distinguishable North Korean identity markers try to practice a South Korean accent and adopt contemporary South Korean clothing and hair styles to pass as South Korean (Chung, 2008). Several students at Hankook school also shared that they often hide their identity as North Korean to avoid discrimination and to pass as South Korean, which is challenging and stressful. M.J. explained that she chose not to disclose her identity as a North Korean to her peers since she experienced bullying in elementary school. M.J. explained how stressful it was hiding her background and acting like a typical South Korean student:

I thought to myself that I should not let people know about my North Korean background. My North Korean identity is something to be ashamed of. I am not belonging here. It was very stressful to hide my background though. I am not the type of person who can disguise myself well. The more I tried to hide my background, the guiltier I felt about myself, because I had to keep creating lies. Eventually I couldn't even figure out who truly I was. I got so much stress because of that. I started to have a chronic migraine and eventually I couldn't even digest well because of the stress. When attending mainstream schools, I thought to myself that, "I am a weirdo, I am too difficult to blend into schools and this society." Then, I told my parents that I wanted to drop out.

M.J. eventually decided to drop out of mainstream high school because of the stress related to bullying and discrimination related to her identity as North Korean. Even though M.J.'s parents wanted her to continue schooling in a mainstream school, they supported her decision because M.J. attempted suicide. I revisit M.J.'s story in Chapter Five in more detail.

For some students, passing as South Korean was not even an option because they had difficulty switching to a South Korean accent or because of their body figures (e.g., short height). Min was a 22-year-old student who joined my English Conversation course at Hankook school. He shared his story about feeling embarrassed and stressed once his North Korean background was made evident in conversations with South Koreans, due to his accent. Noticing his accent, people often asked him if he was from North Korea. Once his background was revealed, Min felt he was treated differently. However, Min shared that he had a very different experience with his North Korean background when living in Canada.

A few years after his relocation to South Korea, he moved to Toronto, hoping to receive refugee status from the Canadian government. While living in Toronto for six years, no one in

his schools or communities made an issue of his North Korean identity. Min told me that he enjoyed living in Toronto because “no one noticed my North Korean accent. I was just one of many immigrant kids.” Passing as South Korean was more difficult in South Korea because of his North Korean accent. In South Korea, using a North Korean accent is a clear indicator that one does not belong to a normative South Korean group. However, his identity as a North Korean refugee was perceived as one of many racial or linguistic minorities in Canada because of the wider variety of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. To his disappointment, however, Min’s application for receiving refugee status was denied by the Canadian government and he had to return to South Korea.

Adopting a South Korean accent was considered one of many tasks for North Korean SRB to successfully transition to South Korean society. Even though having a North Korean accent is a part of their identity, I often observed that students were joking and making fun of their peers for using a strong North Korean accent at Hankook school. Some North Korean SRB found it uncomfortable speaking in public because it immediately indicates their different background from the majority South Koreans. Jung described his experience being with his friends and speaking with a North Korean accent in public:

When I took a subway with friends who just arrived in South Korea who speak with their strong North Korean accent in public, I was so embarrassed being with them. I know that I shouldn’t feel embarrassed, but other people around us kept looking at us, which was very uncomfortable.

Knowing that several characteristics of newly arrived North Koreans are stigmatizing in South Korea, many North Korean SRB practice a South Korean accent and learn South Korean contemporary vocabularies. However, learning a South Korean accent is a time-consuming and

rigorous process. Therefore, passing as South Korean is not an option for North Korean SRB who exhibit characteristics of a North Korean accent.

**The privilege of being South Korean.** Recognizing and experiencing prejudice towards North Korean refugees, many North Korean SRB try to hide or deny their identity and backgrounds. Students quickly learned that having a South Korean identity is favorable, while constantly dealing with prejudice associated with their North Korean heritage or identity. Following a class observation, one senior at Hankook school shared with me how she had difficulty disclosing her identity as a North Korean refugee because of the prejudice associated with North Korean identity within South Korean society. She explained:

My mom tells me that I am South Korean. However, since I was born in North Korea, the label that I am a North Korean keeps following me. When people ask me “where were you born?” then all I can say is “it’s a secret”... I wish I was born here [South Korea]. How come I was born in North Korea? The only difference between me and South Koreans is the origin of birth. I don’t want other people to know that I am from North Korea. If possible, I’d like to hide [that I am from North Korea] as long as I can because there is always prejudice about North Korean refugees.

This student is just one example of many North Korean SRB who experienced prejudice directed at their North Korean identity and developed behaviors to attempt to hide this identity. Other students attempted to assimilate to a South Korean identity, with the belief that it will bring them increased social capital. Jung, a 19-year-old senior at Hankook school, described his desire to meet a South Korean girlfriend:

The reason why I do not have a girl friend at Hankook school is because, I think it’s better to meet a South Korean girl. That’s not because she is pretty or something, but

because I can learn something just from being with her. I think I can learn something simply by talking with her.

It is not uncommon to see student-couples at Hankook school. However, Jung developed a firm idea about his future girlfriend for a practical reason, to help him better assimilate into South Korean language and culture.

One of the teachers, Mr. Ju, also shared his opinion and experience of how students express their ideas about the privilege of being South Korean through interaction with teachers. During the interview, Mr. Ju, shared that students and their parents favor South Korean teachers over North Korean teachers at Hankook school:

Our students like to learn from South Korean teachers. So do their parents. They think that they will learn better and more from South Korean teachers, if they make good relationships with South Korean teachers. And, I do not disagree with it. It would be easier to understand if you think this way; you would prefer to learn English from a native English speaker, rather than from a non-native English speaker...From our perspective [as North Korean refugees], being born in South Korean society is a qualification of being capable and privileged. In terms of language differences, for them [South Koreans], they naturally learn South Korean language as they grew up here, but for us, we have to learn and memorize all the new terms and South Korean style language.

Among 15 full-time teachers at Hankook school, two teachers were from North Korea and one (Mr. Ju) is an alumnus of this school. Even though Mr. Ju, including several other teachers, highlighted the importance of having teachers from North Korea at Hankook school, he also

understood students' desire to learn South Korean culture and language through interacting with "native" South Korean teachers.

### **Navigating through Different Educational Systems**

In the second half of this chapter, I discuss how North Korean SRB navigated through different educational systems between North and South Korean schools. Depending on the educational context and system to which each student belongs, students are given a different range of educational opportunity. For example, many North Korean SRB did not have access to formal education before or during their refugee journey. Upon arrival to South Korea, however, North Korean SRB were provided with opportunities to receive free formal education. Because of the access to education, many students at Hankook school were able to continue and find their future careers. North Korean SRB also faced challenges in navigating through the South Korean education system because of different roles and characteristics expected for students in North and South Korean schools. North Korean SRB were often expected to relearn their role as a student in South Korean schools. In this section, I discuss how students' access to educational opportunities are dependent on sociocultural contexts in different societies. I illustrate stories from a few students who did not have access to education prior to their relocation to South Korea, then determined their future career while in South Korean schools. Then I report findings of challenges that students faced navigating through South Korea's education system.

**Increased access to formal and free education in South Korea.** As the number of school-age North Koreans relocating to South Korea increased, the South Korean government established policies to support incoming North Koreans' settlement<sup>23</sup> (ROK, 1997b; 2017a).

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<sup>23</sup> In 1997, the North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act was established and revised several times thereafter, indicating the details of legal status, regulations, and benefits that North Koreans receive upon arrival to South Korea. According to the Settlement Support Act, any North Korean relocators younger than 35 are given free tuition up to university level, in addition to settlement funds and free housing. In the college application

Other public and private organizations joined in this trend by creating support programs for North Korean SRB (e.g., Korea Hana Foundation, Education Support Center for North Korean Students in South Korea). Because of the benefits and educational supports, many North Korean SRB began to have better access to formal education and continued on to higher education.

Several North Korean SRB I met had interrupted short- or long-term formal education in North Korea and/or during their time as refugees. Hyang, a 17-year-old senior, had to discontinue her elementary education in North Korea because of the economic hardship she faced after her father's passing. In North Korea, students were required to provide goods (e.g., rabbit skins, rice, or iron) to school regularly, in lieu of monetary tuition. These non-monetary goods were collected and distributed to teachers or soldiers who do not earn a living wage from the government. Because Hyang could not provide non-monetary goods after her father passed away, she could not attend elementary school. Instead, Hyang had to work for several of her mother's different boyfriends who occasionally abused Hyang. Hyang described her daily routine:

It is really dark at 5 a.m. in North Korea. Especially in the winter, it is completely dark. My step-fathers, well, I would say they were just my mom's boyfriends. Anyway, they would wake me up at 5:30 in the morning and make me deliver corn stalks to be used as food for our goats. In the summer, I had to do weeding, and in the fall, I had to do gleaning (collecting left rice or grains in the farm). In the winter, I still had to do gleaning and deliver charcoals.

Having dealt with economic hardship for a few years after her father passed, Hyang and her mother finally decided to escape North Korea. Until Hyang and her mother relocated to South

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process, North Korean SRB have the benefit of applying for a special track, which increases the entrance rate compared to South Korean students.

Korea, Hyang did not receive any formal education for about four years. Because of the long-term interruption of her formal education, she had a hard time catching up with school work in the beginning of her life in South Korea. However, Hyang actively searched multiple resources and educational opportunities that were the best fits for her. As a result, she decided to transfer to Hankook school for the individualized support for North Korean SRB. During her time at Hankook school, Hyang discovered that her dream was to become a robot scientist. After she identified her desire to become a robot scientist, Hyang actively participated in free workshops on computer programming, which helped her build more concrete ideas about her future. She also applied and was accepted as one of ten high school students in South Korea for a fellowship program that included traveling to several countries in Europe and Asia. In 2018, Hyang enrolled at one of the most prestigious universities in South Korea. Given more opportunities for education in South Korea, Hyang was able to explore what her interests were and build her own career, which was not an option for her before relocating to South Korea.

Another student, Moon, a 22-year-old freshman, also had long-term interrupted formal education during his refugee journey. Until he enrolled in Hankook school, Moon did not receive any formal education for ten years. Moon shared his story about how he could not afford any formal education living in China for ten years. As soon as he crossed the border to China with his mother, his mother was sold to a Chinese man. Living with his Chinese stepfather, Moon had to work for him on the farm performing strenuous labor. Exhausted from the work on the farm, Moon left home to make money on his own. For ten years, Moon worked at many different places to support himself, as a construction worker, busboy in a restaurant, and selling insurance. Moon explained the reason why he decided to come to South Korea after ten years of working in China:



At my age of 12, I began to work as a construction worker building an apartment complex, for about five years. Because I couldn't go to school and couldn't learn while working there, I didn't have any skills. All I could do was just using my manual labor, which was really exhausting. After five years working as a construction worker, I couldn't do it anymore. I decided to leave the construction job. Then, I worked at an insurance company selling insurance, served tables in restaurants, I did everything...As I was getting older, I thought about my future, like getting married and stuff. I couldn't think of my future there. So, I talked to my mom about leaving for South Korea. A few days later, my mom and I left China.

After relocating to South Korea, Moon enrolled in Hankook school at age 21. Moon had not had any formal education since leaving North Korea, but the educational opportunities that he received at Hankook school allowed him to plan his future. He now has a more detailed plan for his future such as going to a college to become a Chinese-Korean translator.

Another student, Jung, a 19-year-old senior, was able to find and pursue his dream as a professional Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fighter in South Korea. Like many other North Korean SRB, he did not receive any formal education as a refugee in China, however in South Korea he discovered that his goal was to become a professional UFC fighter. Without financial support to receive professional training, he applied for a private scholarship program available to North Korean SRB. Fortunately, he was selected as one of the recipients of the scholarship and was able to join a professional UFC training center. When I met Jung again during my second visit to Hankook school, he had a cast on one foot from a training injury. Jung could not continue his training until he recovered from the injury. To my question about whether he had ever regretted his decision to pursue his dream as a UFC fighter, he gave me a firm

answer, “No, I don’t regret. Even though I broke my ankle now, without this sport, my life is nothing. I cannot imagine living this arduous life without it.” Moon also expressed that the opportunities and educational supports that he was able to access in South Korea was something that he had never even dreamed of as a refugee. Having North Korean identity afforded him increased educational opportunities and supports in South Korea. Further, students learned how to create ways to pursue their goal by applying for scholarships or participating in workshops outside of the school.

Even though the increased educational opportunities helped North Korean SRB continue their education, support provided to North Korean SRB reinforced the role of North Korean SRB as being passive recipients. For example, students who received educational supports—especially from private donors or organizations—were often required to show their gratitude to the supporters. I observed that a few students who were recipients of private scholarships were asked to write a thank you card to the donor (I revisit this issue and discuss more in detail later in Chapter Six).

***Limited opportunities for other minority students.*** Other minority students do not have the same educational opportunities or benefits that are being provided to North Korean SRB in South Korea. For example, children of immigrant workers or school-age refugees from countries other than North Korea are not eligible for free tuition or a special track for college entrance (Ministry of Unification, 2017b). According to the North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act (2017), only those born within the North Korean territory are subject to receiving South Korean citizenship and related benefits (e.g., free college tuition) upon their arrival to South Korea. Thus, school-age children or adolescents who were born to North Korean

parent(s), but outside of North Korea, even as refugees waiting to immigrate to South Korea, are not given South Korean citizenship or any benefits that were given to North Korean SRB.

In South Korea, children of North Koreans who are born outside of North Korea are commonly referred to as *Biboho*, meaning that they are not protected by the North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act. I refer to them here as students with North Korean heritage, to denote that they are children of North Korean(s). Currently, the number of incoming children or adolescents born to North Korean parent/s outside of North Korea outnumbered those born in North Korea<sup>24</sup> (Ministry of Unification, 2017c). This trend is related to the circumstances that many female North Korean refugees face during their refugee journey, as many are targets of human trafficking in China. Female North Korean refugees are often married to Chinese men and have a child or children during their time in China. Some mothers decide to relocate to South Korea after having children. Because of the rigorous and dangerous journey of relocation to South Korea, North Korean mothers often have to leave their children behind in China, with a plan to bring their children later to join them in South Korea. By the time North Korean mothers successfully relocate to South Korea and can afford to bring their children from China, their children have often grown up to be teenagers.

Children with North Korean heritage face several challenges when they come to South Korea. Born and raised in China, they find it difficult to adjust in South Korean schools and society. Most of these students do not speak the Korean language or identify as North or South Korean. *Biboho* students are not eligible to receive any social welfare benefits or educational support (e.g., free tuition or benefit in college entrance examinations), which were provided to

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<sup>24</sup> As of December 2016, among all the incoming school-age students parented by North Korean refugees, 52.3% of them (1,317 out of 2,517) were born outside of North Korea. The number of students with North Korean heritage are growing every year. 98.6% of students with North Korean heritage were born in China.

North Korean SRB. The South Korean Ministry of Education has not provided guidance on how mainstream schools can support these students, leaving it unlikely that schools will accommodate the students who lack the ability to speak the Korean language, including other immigrant students (Choi, Kwak, Chae, & Park, 2011). As a result, more students with North Korean heritage choose to be educated in alternative schools like Hankook school. Currently at Hankook school, about 40 percent of the student body comprises students with North Korean heritage and this number is increasing. I observed at the school that students often spoke to each other in Chinese language (Mandarin), rather than Korean. Several students with North Korean heritage shared with me that their transition to college is much more difficult than North Korean SRB because of a lack of educational or financial supports provided by the South Korean government. While many North Korean SRB are given a wide range of opportunities to pursue their goals, students with North Korean heritage are excluded from receiving equal access to education because of where they were born.

**Different educational goals and expectations.** I discussed examples of North Korean SRB who found their future career through formal or informal educational opportunities afforded to them in South Korea. These students (Hyang, Moon, and Jung) actively sought to find ways to receive more educational opportunities within the South Korean education system. However, other students had difficulty understanding their roles as students in a new society because of the different ideology and the goals of education between North and South Korean society. Grounded in a socialist ideology, students in North Korea are viewed as potential contributors to strengthening the communist military regime (Park et al., 2014). North Korean SRB who are accustomed to the North Korean school system and new to South Korea find it difficult to understand their role as a learner in a different society. The different expectations for learners in

each country caused many North Korean SRB to encounter challenges, which often led them to question their ability as a learner. Ms. Lee, a former teacher in North Korea and a coordinator and a teacher at Hankook school, explained common challenges that many North Korean SRB faced in the South Korean educational system, because of the different educational experience between the two countries:

In North Korea, all you have to do is just follow what the government ordered you to do. If the government tells you to complete ten different tasks, you need to do ten tasks exactly. You shouldn't do nine or eleven tasks. However, in South Korea, our [North Korean] students find it very difficult to make their own decision because there are so many different choices. In North Korea, you should do what the government appoints you to do after high school. Boys would go to serve military duty<sup>25</sup>. It's that simple! But here, no one tells you to do anything, you have to make your own decision, like when you go to bank, go shopping, go to school, and even making decision for your future career. This type of thing [having to make their own decision] is way more difficult for my students than the challenges that they faced throughout their refugee journey.

As a former teacher in North Korea, Ms. Lee could identify with students struggling to perform their student role as an active and autonomous learner in South Korean schools. One of the student participants at Hankook school also expressed her frustration resulting from making autonomous decisions in South Korea. Mi, a 21-year-old senior, was dealing with a great deal of stress when I interviewed her because she was preparing for her college application at that time. The most difficult thing for her was figuring out what she wanted to do in the future. Unlike

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<sup>25</sup> In North Korea, ordinary men and women after high school (except for certain groups of people, e.g., individuals with disabilities or individuals with outstanding skills) are subject to serve mandatory military duty: twelve years for men and seven years for women (Ministry of Unification, 2018).

several other student participants, Mi could not find what she wanted to do. During her college application process, Mi had argued multiple times with both her father and her homeroom teacher:

I argued a lot with my father and my teacher because I don't know what I like to do nor what I am good at. Being good at something in South Korea means that you have to be exceedingly good at it, compared to South Korean kids. According to South Korean standards, we [North Korean SRB] are not good. I am not good at anything. Well, I don't even know what I like to do. I was so frustrated because my teacher told me to find what I want to do for my college application this year (senior year). To be honest with you, isn't it teacher's job to provide me a solution and teach me what I need to do? Because I don't know which path would lead me to a certain job, teachers need to tell me about the process. I was completely lost because my teacher asked me to decide what major and school I want to apply for. I was very frustrated and angry.

Not knowing what she wanted to do, Mi eventually followed her father's recommendation and applied for nursing school. However, her homeroom teacher, Mr. San, had a different viewpoint about the attitude that students at Hankook school held, including Mi, about their independent decision making in college application and school life in general. Mr. San described that North Korean SRB tend to be dependent on teachers not only because they are not accustomed to making such decisions independently but also because they do not know what to expect in terms of the outcomes that these decisions will lead to. As Mi mentioned, North Korean SRB have limited experience and access to successfully navigate through the competitive and complicated South Korean education system.

In addition, students who are accustomed to performing in the North Korean educational system may find performing the student role in South Korean schools challenging. As mentioned earlier, in North Korea, students are considered potential contributors to strengthening the communist military regime (Park et al., 2014). Critical thinking or autonomy is not allowed for any students in North Korean schools. On the other hand, the main educational goal in South Korea highlights fostering autonomous individuals who independently plan their future and will contribute to a capitalist democratic society (Park et al., 2014; Reed, 1997). The goal of public education is described in an official document, *Education in South Korea*, published by the Ministry of Education, which is illustrative of South Korea's educational ideology:

Based on its brilliant economic growth, Korean society has devoted itself to realize a competency-based condition rather than obsolete educational backgrounds. It has discovered the talents and creativity of each student, has fostered the flexible manpower suitable for creative economic era and has devoted itself to modify its own educational system to deal with the rapidly changing demands of society (MOE, 2015, p. 19).

According to this 53-page document published by the Ministry of Education, the “competency-based” nature is highlighted and embedded in the educational ideology of South Korea. The goal of education is described as helping students be able to respond to a rapidly changing global economy and in turn become contributors to the economic growth of South Korea. In order to ensure the economic competitiveness of South Korea in the global economy, the Ministry of Education highlights their willingness to modify the country's educational system to meet the “rapidly changing demands of society.” This capitalist-driven ideology is prominent in public education, which promotes competition in education. Within the current South Korean public

education system, North Korean SRB may experience difficulty adapting to the role expected of them as a student in South Korean schools.

Another reason that North Korean SRB find it challenging to navigate through the South Korean education system is their limited access to literacy as the linguistic minority in South Korean society and education system. For example, writing an essay, participating in an oral interview, or utilizing presentation skills are important aspects of the college application process as well as college classrooms in South Korea (Park, 2015). In contrast to their South Korean peers who have years of education in writing and presentation, several seniors that I met at Hankook school expressed how hard it is to develop those skills to prepare for a college application. Students asserted that they were not taught the “South Korean essay writing and speaking style,” which requires them to include their own opinions in writings and in oral interviews. Knowing their different educational experiences in North Korea where they were not allowed to express their ideas, teachers at Hankook school included several activities to help students get accustomed to participating in oral presentations, classroom discussions, and expository writing (I discuss this topic more in detail in Chapter Six). However, participating in discussions and expressing their ideas in written form still remained challenging for many students.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed findings related to the first research question in this study: how do North Korean SRB describe their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee backgrounds and relocation to South Korean society? While navigating through different societies, North Korean SRB developed an understanding about their multidimensional identities as a majority member of society, an illegal resident, as well as a linguistic and cultural



minority within different societies. The understanding of students' multidimensional identities is related to normative human traits that each society constructs and values. Annamma et al. (2013) recognize that society's response to differences from the norm matters; as long as mainstream traits, such as Whiteness and ability are perceived as normal in Western society, one's differences can be viewed as deficits. In South Korean society, many North Korean SRB experience a similar phenomenon: students' North Korean identities and characteristics (e.g., accent, style, body figure) are viewed as deviant, compared with the normative traits of their middle class ethnic South Korean peers. Thus, students face discrimination against, or a stigma related to, their identity. To avoid prejudice against their stigmatized identity, student participants developed their own strategies, such as hiding their backgrounds and adopting South Korean norms. In contrast, one student revealed her identity as a North Korean refugee as a means to an educational opportunity and to change prejudice that people around her held towards North Koreans.

North Korean SRB faced another type of challenge due to the different expectations and desired roles of students in the South Korean education system. A student's competency as a learner is interpreted through the set of expectations that each society constructed. While navigating through different educational systems, students are often unfamiliar and uncertain about what is expected of them. Therefore, a student can be recognized as a capable or incapable learner depending on the society in which they reside, and the extent to which they are supported in meeting new expectations. In addition, North Korean SRB are considered as multicultural students in mainstream schools. While this identity is not formally linked to disability, it takes on similar meanings as multicultural students become viewed as having deficit and needing special support.

However, the intersection of disability and refugee identity also occurs beyond analogous levels. Students' negative experiences related to their identity in South Korean society and schools often lead them to experience mental health difficulties, in part because they are more likely to experience discrimination - accent, ability on tests (refugee). To avoid prejudice against their stigmatized identity, student participants developed their own strategies, such as hiding their backgrounds and adopting South Korean norms. Only one student (Sue) revealed that she tries to use her identity as a North Korean refugee as a means for educational opportunity and to change prejudice that people around her held towards North Koreans. The tendency that several student participants experienced discrimination in South Korean schools because of their North Korean refugee identity reveals the limitations of how peers, teachers, and school leaders respond to students with diverse backgrounds in current South Korean schools and society at large. The findings of this chapter demonstrate the importance of the interplay between embodied and social aspects of disability. While students do experience mental and physical health challenges as a result of their refugee journey, the social circumstances within South Korea that cause or exacerbate these challenges illustrate how social barriers can become embodied aspects of individual's disability (Connell, 2011; Erevelles, 2011). In the next chapter, I discuss the material circumstances related to (dis)ability that many North Korean SRB experienced through their journey of relocation, which further expands an understanding of how (dis)ability is experienced by North Korean SRB.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **The Politics of Embodying (Dis)ability**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the socio-political aspects of refugee identity by examining how North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) described their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee experiences and relocation to South Korean society. In this chapter, I report my analysis and interpretations of North Korean SRB's descriptions of their experience in relation to (dis)ability as they left their home country and relocated to South Korea. This chapter is intended to answer the second research question of this study: how is (dis)ability constructed and experienced for North Korean SRB in South Korean schools? I formulated this question with the understanding that disability and ability are not fixed conditions but politicized and contextualized sociocultural ideas. In this chapter, I discuss the nuances of the way students are seen as (dis)abled in the context of schooling. I further share how characteristics of North Korean SRB are perceived by teachers and students' peers, and in turn how North Korean SRB become a stigmatized identity in South Korean schools.

I first discuss how North Korean SRB understood and described disability. I then share the physical or mental health challenges that North Korean SRB described in relation to their refugee experience. Later in this chapter, I address how students' understanding of their academic identity shifted depending on the context of their schooling. The findings in this chapter illustrate how students' skills and qualities were interpreted differently as strengths or weaknesses, depending on the school context. The data sources that I used for this chapter include interview transcripts with nine teachers and six students, fieldnotes, and monthly newsletters published by teachers at Hankook school.

## **Constructed Meanings of Disability**

In this dissertation study, I grounded my epistemological understanding about (dis)ability in a social model of disability, in which (dis)ability is explained as a socially constructed phenomenon (Shakespeare, 2006; Taylor, 2006). A social model of disability supports the idea that the meaning of (dis)ability shifts depending on context and lived experiences of individuals. North Korean SRB have lived in several countries with different social status as a legal citizen and a refugee. Through their experience as a North Korean, a refugee, and a South Korean, North Korean SRB develop their understanding about (dis)ability across multiple cultural contexts. In this section, I first introduce the meanings of disability for North Korean SRB and teachers at Hankook school. Then, I discuss how students and teachers understand disability in a school context.

**North Korean SRB's evolving views of disability.** To examine how (dis)ability is constructed and experienced by North Korean SRB, I first examined how students and teachers thought about or described disability. Students and teachers described their evolving understanding of disability, which aligned with both the social model and medical model of disability. Student participants described disability as “physical impairment,” “lacking something,” or something “inconvenient.” Several students identified people with disabilities as lacking autonomy or having to rely on help from others. Moon, a 22-year-old freshman, described that people with disabilities are “those who have difficulty functioning by themselves.” He previously thought “having a disability is something very unfortunate and disabled people are often abandoned by their family or close people, especially those who were born with disability.” Another student, Sue, a 22-year-old senior, described disability as “something that requires help from others because of the physical or psychological difficulties.” While a majority of students

understood disability from medical and deficit perspectives, a 21-year-old senior, Mi, spoke about disability as being contextualized depending on social norms. Mi described disabled people as “those who have difficulty using a part of their body. Also, those who seem to lack something compared to the norms that society or majority people created.”

Students’ understanding about disability or disabled people changed over time during my fieldwork. When I asked the same question to the student participants a few months after the initial interviews, two of the students shared how their understanding about disability shifted. During this time, Moon and Sue read books written by South Korean disabled authors who were known for being successful in their careers. In these books, writers described reaching accomplishments, despite their disabilities. Moon and Sue explained that their perception about disability and disabled people changed after reading the books. Sue, a 22-year-old senior, directly connected her shift in understanding disability to the book she recently read:

I read a book called “*Nanun Mutjigo Arumdapda [I am Awesome and Beautiful]*.” After reading this book, I began to relate disabled people to images like hardworking, persevering, overcoming, or accomplishing. It [reading a book] gave me an opportunity to look back at myself as well.

Similarly, Moon, a 22-year-old freshman, expressed that his understanding has been shifted after reading the book, as “disabled people can live along with other people [non-disabled people]. Disabled people can overcome their disability and live their life with a more positive attitude than non-disabled people.” These two students identified that they were inspired by the stories from the book, which influenced them to change their understanding about disability.

Students explained that they rarely met disabled individuals or peers in town or schools in North Korea, whereas they saw more people with disabilities in public in South Korea. Students

related the difference in visibility of disabled people between the two countries to the disability accommodations afforded to disabled people. Students identified that disabled people have varying degree of participation in communal life depending on the access to accommodations in different societies.

**Teachers' evolving view of disability.** When asked what they thought disability meant, teachers and school leaders defined disability in terms that reflected characteristics of both the medical and social models. A few teachers described disability as something “visible,” or “obvious,” which hinders one’s “ordinary” life. In contrast, another teacher, Ms. Ryu, extended the definition of disability to describe “social oppression” or “bias” upon minority groups, such as her students. Ms. Ryu recalled that her perception about disability has been changed since she worked with North Korean SRB:

As I listened to stories from my students about being treated badly or unfairly in South Korea because of their backgrounds, I began to think that whoever treated my students badly have a disability in their mind. I think having a bias or prejudice is a disability.

Ms. Ryu pointed out that bias and stigma put individuals in a disadvantaged position in South Korea. Ironically, in this interview, Ms. Ryu used the term “disability” as a replacement for indicating something negative or wrong when she described one’s bias or oppressive attitude towards North Korean SRB. Even though Ms. Ryu identified that social oppression and bias disable her students in South Korean society, her use of the term “disability”—something bad within one’s mind—reveals the negative connotation of disability.

Another question that I asked teachers and students was if there were any students with disabilities at Hankook School, and if so, what disability labels students had. My intention for this question was to better understand how students and teachers identify disability in a school

context. The answers from students and teachers differed. None of the students identified as having a disability themselves in that they tended to identify disability as something visible or physical. There was no student with visible or physical impairment in the school, and students identified neither themselves nor their peers as individuals who have a disability.

While students expressed that they don't have students with disabilities in school, teachers and school leaders identified that several students had "mental health issues or psychological disorders" such as an eating disorder, depression, or bipolar disorder. Teachers viewed these particular conditions as situational or related to adverse experiences, not something inherent in the student themselves. For example, when describing students' physical or mental health conditions, teachers almost always included background information about the situation that each student faced—the circumstances that led each student to exhibit symptoms of mental health difficulties—viewing these circumstances as creating the problem. Further, neither students nor teachers described learning or classroom behavioral characteristics as a disability. Rather, teachers and students perceived learning or behavioral characteristics as a result of students' educational and life experiences from being North Korean refugees.

Many students at Hankook school experienced or exhibited symptoms of psychological disorders or mental health conditions, often related to their refugee experience and stressful transition to South Korean society. Thus, both teachers and students tended to understand experiencing mental health conditions as a natural response to the environments in which students were situated. Yet, they viewed visible or physical impairments as "legitimate" disabilities. Responses from teachers and students were indicative of how the meaning of disability is fluid and dependent on one's belief, experiences and sociocultural context. Students and teachers identified certain types of physical or intellectual impairment as "legitimate"

disability based on their belief about what disability is. At the same time, the fact that many students experienced or exhibited symptoms of psychological disorders influenced teachers' and students' view of psychological disorders as temporary conditions that many North Korean SRB may experience, rather than a disability. The results of students' and teachers' understanding about disability indicate that the meaning of (dis)ability evolved depending on sociocultural context as well as one's life experience.

### **How North Korean SRB Embody (Dis)ability**

Students and teachers at Hankook school recounted that many North Korean SRB are struggling with physical and mental health conditions because of their refugee experiences. To understand the challenges that North Korean SRB experienced from the perspective of a school administrator, I had several conversations with Ms. Yeon, the vice-principal at Hankook school. Because many students felt comfortable sharing their private stories with her, Ms. Yeon was an important resource for learning about students' struggles related to their refugee experience. As one of the founding members of Hankook school, Ms. Yeon previously spent years helping North Korean refugees in China. While doing so, she was once arrested by the Chinese authorities and sent to jail. Since it was and still is prohibited by the Chinese government to aid North Korean refugees in China, no one can guarantee North Koreans would reach South Korea safely. Her experience helping North Korean refugees in China helped her better understand the challenges that many North Korean SRB undergo during their refugee journey.

Ms. Yeon explained that students sometimes question the authenticity of her passion for helping North Korean SRB and North Korean refugees. Students have asked her if she had ever faced a life-or-death situation or ever starved, like many of them had. After Ms. Yeon shared her experience helping North Korean refugees and being arrested in China, many students would



begin to be more open with her and trust her, feeling a kind of comradeship with Ms. Yeon. I observed many students having a close relationship with Ms. Yeon. Students at Hankook school often approached Ms. Yeon when they had concerns or issues related to family safety, physical or mental health conditions, or financial difficulties. Ms. Yeon informed me that several students were currently dealing with physical and mental health issues due to the conditions that they had to endure throughout their refugee experience, or in North Korea:

Because our students survived many dangerous and oppressive conditions in North Korea and China at a very young age, they have serious psychological traumas. Imagine that you are running a race. When you fall during the race, you don't feel the pain until you pass the finish line. Our students are like that. They won't get to feel how physically and mentally sick or stressed they are until they come to South Korea. Here, they finally begin to feel all these conditions. Because of that, we [teachers at Hankook school] focus on rehabilitation of students' physical and mental health through providing them with counseling sessions, art therapy, and medical care. About 30 percent of our students have had medical treatment with medications for their mental health conditions. About 60 percent of our students have symptoms of diabetes and anemia. I didn't understand why they had symptoms of such conditions [adult diseases] when I first worked with our students. Many of them were accustomed to having only one meal a day in North Korea or in China. However, once they come to South Korea, they eat three meals a day, which is not a lot compared to what typical South Korean students have. Because of the surplus of nutrition that their bodies are not ready to handle, students show such symptoms of diabetes. What a shameful reality!

Similar to Ms. Yeon's metaphor of "running a race," another teacher, Mr. Song—who has been working at Hankook school since the second year of the school's foundation—also described how physical or mental health challenges that have been building finally begin to manifest when students relocated to a new society:

I think it's like students have festering boils in North Korea and China. Once they arrive in South Korea, those festering boils finally pop out. They were victimized by a lot of terrible things without even noticing, but once they come to South Korea, those memories are reminded and make them feel painful...

To support students with physical and mental health challenges, teachers and staff at Hankook School prioritized rehabilitation of students' physical and mental health challenges. Students were provided with counseling or art therapy sessions by visiting professionals, and most of the medical expenses were paid by the school. Teachers expressed that students who are physically weak or have some physical issues tend to recover faster, as they receive professional medical treatments. However, students struggling with both mental health challenges and physical issues tended to have a slower recovery. Ms. Yeon observed that students' mental health conditions are often deeply rooted in the adversities that students faced during and after their refugee journey, and that they need time to recover from the conditions they have experienced:

Students come to me and share their experiences, like being sex trafficked, physically abused, facing several incidents of human rights violation which they could not stand up to. They had to endure such conditions to survive during their refugee journey. However, those experiences left sore wounds to our students already, and it often makes them experience hard time here.

Unfortunately, many students at Hankook school experienced physical or emotional violence during their refugee journey or even in North Korea. As the metaphors of “running a race” and “festering boil” indicate, students often began to experience mental health challenges after they relocated to South Korea. Several students that I met at Hankook school told me how they either overcame or still continue to struggle with their mental health. As I shared in Chapter Four, Jung, a 19-year-old senior, self-identified as having experienced depression after relocating to South Korea, due to the oppressive conditions that Jung had to endure as a refugee in China:

As I told you before, I mostly stayed at home [because of my North Korean refugee status] in China. When I came to South Korea, I didn’t know anything about this society. I was afraid of even going outside or being in public. I didn’t know what to do and didn’t have any self-esteem. And because of the stress and resentment that I had in China, I had a phobia of interacting with people and finally got depression.

After Jung arrived in South Korea, he became afraid of interacting with people in public, such as in a subway or in a supermarket for a while because of his experience in China. Several other students whom I met at Hankook school expressed that they have had symptoms of depression or panic disorder since they came to South Korea. Kim, a 20-year-old senior, told me that she experienced symptoms of panic disorder after she relocated to South Korea, which made it difficult to interact with people. Kim said “I could not make eye contact with people. For about three months, I kept wearing a cap [to avoid making eye contact with other people].” Even though both Jung and Kim expressed that they were recovered from such conditions, they highlighted that experiencing mental health challenges was a continuous process which took time.

**Living in stressful conditions as North Korean SRB.** Students' backgrounds and identity as North Korean SRB often led them to experience stressful situations after their relocation to South Korea. The stress that students experienced often hindered them from focusing on studying. One example of a stressor is the uncertainty of family safety. Many students at Hankook school had immediate family members remaining in North Korea. Some students were separated from their family members during their refugee journey. In some cases, students witnessed their family members being deported, going missing, or being trafficked. As a result, students had to live under the heavy stress of worrying about their family members' safety. A student, Lee, shared her experience of developing depression when her mother went missing. Lee left North Korea by herself and a few months later, her mother also crossed the North Korean border. Soon after Lee relocated to South Korea, she was informed that her mother was caught in China and deported back to North Korea. Since then, Lee could not find out if her mother was even alive. Lee shared how devastated she was when the incident happened to her mother:

In 2015, I heard that my mother was caught in China and deported to North Korea. Knowing that no one can guarantee the safety of one's life in prison camps in North Korea, I couldn't focus on studying. I was emotionally and psychologically devastated. I felt like such tragedy only happened to me. Because of that, I became extremely depressed and wanted to give up everything at that time.

Two years after her mother was deported, Lee found out that her mother escaped North Korea again and was able to successfully reach the South Korean embassy in Thailand. When I had a conversation with Lee at Hankook school, she was waiting to meet her mother until her mother

completed the legal process to relocate to South Korea. Unfortunately, not every student was as lucky as Lee, who finally reunited with her family member.

Ken, a 21-year-old freshman, had a very different experience. Ken was a student in my English tutoring session who relocated to South Korea with his two younger siblings a few years ago. Although he had a high school degree in North Korea, Ken recalled that he could not keep up with the curriculum in almost every subject in South Korean schools. As we got to know each other, he expressed that English was particularly difficult for him, so I volunteered to tutor him in English. We met regularly after school for a one-on-one English lesson. One rainy day in July, Ken seemed gloomy and quieter than usual. When I asked him if he was okay, Ken shared a story about his family. When he was 15 years old in North Korea, his mother was arrested and sent to a prison camp for illegally importing goods and products from China. Since then, he has not heard from his mother. It was July 13<sup>th</sup> when his mother was arrested, a rainy summer day. Since that incident happened, rainy days in summer reminded him of his mother. Ken's story is an example of the trauma experienced by refugees and asylum-seekers who witness the death of family members, experience deportation, and undergo physical and emotional abuse. Aspects of their daily lives—such as a rainy day—can trigger strong emotional reactions.

Another student, M.J., a 19-year-old senior, expressed that the discrimination and bullying that she experienced because of her North Korean background in South Korean schools led her to develop physical and psychological challenges, such as chronic headaches, indigestion, and depression:

M.J.: I had so much stress all the time, and because of that, I had a serious migraine. In high school, I couldn't even digest one meal a day because of the stress.

Song: What was most stressful for you?

M.J.: Well, when I first came to South Korea, I experienced a lot of discrimination and I got bullied pretty badly. I thought the bad memory of getting bullied and discriminated would go away as time went by.

Song: In elementary school?

M.J.: Yes, I got bullied a lot in elementary school. That experience left me with deep scars. Because of that experience, I tried hard to impress people to avoid bullying. While doing so, I over-used my energy [to impress people].

Song: When did you realize that you were trying to impress other people?

M.J.: When I received a counseling service at Hankook school... When I first started counseling sessions at Hankook school, I was recommended to be hospitalized because of serious depression. And, I was also informed that I had something called “co-dependency disorder.” This is a disorder often found in children whose parents are alcoholic.

Anyway, I was found that I had a serious co-dependency disorder, so I was advised to be medicated and hospitalized.

Song: Who told you that?

M.J.: Dr. Yoo [the professional counselor].

As mentioned in Chapter Four, M.J. attempted suicide right before transferring to Hankook school. As a result of the continued stress as a North Korean SRB, M.J. experienced several physical and psychological challenges which led her to attempt suicide. Fortunately, M.J. benefitted from the counseling service at Hankook school and she was told that she no longer needed counseling services.

Similar to North Korean SRB that I met at Hankook school, many refugee or asylum-seeking students experience trauma or depression related to their refugee experience as well as

unstable family status (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Marlowe, 2010). In addition, as M.J.'s story indicates, transitioning to a new society and school create various challenges, which may cause students to experience mental health issues. For these students, mental health support is crucial for their successful schooling experience. However, considering the sensitivity of their mental health challenges, these issues were often not recognized or supported unless teachers and school leaders paid close attention to each student's struggles. Students' experience in mainstream schools is indicative of how difficult it is for students to receive necessary supports and accommodations.

**Intersectional oppression towards female North Korean SRB.** Female North Korean refugees experience multilayered oppressions due to trafficking targeted towards female North Korean border-crossers. After relocation, female North Korean SRB faced prejudice for being female refugees in South Korean society. Female North Korean refugees—who cannot afford brokers—often fall victim to trafficking and are forced to live with local men in China who bought them from traffickers (Chang, 2017). Living in China for years, many female refugees inevitably begin to form families. A few female students at Hankook school had a similar experience before relocating to South Korea. Through several years of married life in China, some students developed gynecological issues, which were often found and treated after they came to Hankook school. Mr. Song explained his experience of supporting female students who were trafficked and had to live in China:

Several female students in our school experienced childbirth or something related to that in China. So, some students are found to have sexually transmitted diseases (STD), which they didn't even know. When it is discovered from a health checkup, we help them to receive proper treatment. It is quite difficult to talk to students when they were found to

have STD. In that case, female teachers usually accompany the student to the hospital for treatment.

Recovery from physical treatment is often quicker than recovery from mental health difficulties. One female student that I met was recovering from her suicide attempt that happened a year before. She was a young mother who left her child behind in China before coming to South Korea. She struggled with the feeling of guilt for giving up her child as well as yearning to be a mother in her child's life. As a result, she experienced serious depression and eventually tried to kill herself. As a result, this student had to be hospitalized until she was physically and emotionally recovered from the suicide attempt.

Another challenge that young North Korean females with refugee backgrounds face is resentment about the circumstances they experienced. One young woman that I came to know through my preliminary research shared her friend's story with me. A friend of my participant was impregnated and gave birth to a child in China during her refugee journey, which left her with permanent stretch marks from the pregnancy. She was worried about her past being unwillingly disclosed to a future boyfriend because of the stretch marks. Several female students that I met at Hankook school expressed their resentment about the time spent in China.

Although female students are often in need of support related to their refugee experience, many students felt reluctant to ask for help due to the negative judgments imposed upon their identity and backgrounds once they immigrate to South Korean society. As the number of North Korean refugees increased in South Korea, the dangerous journey that many North Korean refugees undergo (e.g., trafficking or deportation) has been publicized much more than before. However, the public interest often focused on the surface level of the refugee experience, such as sex trafficking of female refugees. Female North Korean refugees are often viewed as scapegoats



of sex trafficking, or even as sex workers who traded their virginity as a means of survival during their refugee journey (Lee, 2011). When I was staying in South Korea during data collection, I had an interesting conversation with a friend of mine, which represented the biased perspective towards female North Korean refugees. Below, I introduce this conversation with my friend, as it demonstrates the oppressive dialogue towards female North Korean refugees in South Korean society.

My friend, Yang—a special education teacher in South Korea—attended a professional development program about family therapy. During the lecture, the instructor who was a South Korean family therapist shared with the audience her experience working with North Korean refugees. According to the lecturer, female North Korean refugees were categorized into two groups: 1) those who directly came to South Korea with help from brokers, and 2) those who spent years in China. The second group of female refugees was described as those who would do anything to survive, including having sex with anyone. This simplified categorization of refugees minimizes the degree of the emotional, physical, and psychological insecurity that the female refugees had to manage throughout their refugee journey. Female refugees are more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence than male refugees. However, the public interest focuses solely on the virginity of the female body, rather than the immoral conditions that many female refugees are forced to encounter. Also, the courageous life journey that many independent female refugees take is simply dismissed by such a violent perception about female refugees. This gender-targeted judgment towards female North Korean refugees becomes another layer of oppression and violence, which makes it difficult for many young female North Korean SRB—who were trafficked, raped and/or impregnated—to disclose their background in South Korean society.

**Challenges in Receiving Support for Mental Health Conditions.** Although many North Korean SRB are in need of mental health support after relocating to South Korea, it is hard to find support from mental health professionals who share an understanding of a student's refugee journey. North Korean SRB reported that it is difficult to find support from mental health professionals who understand students' backgrounds and identities as North Korean refugees. Three of the student participants had participated in multiple counseling sessions before and after they came to Hankook school. However, students reported that counseling sessions conducted by South Korean counselors in particular, were not very helpful because the counselors appeared not to understand what they were struggling with.

Mi, a 21-year-old senior, was one of the students who was looking for support from mental health professionals when I first met her at Hankook school. She was struggling with an eating disorder and depression at that time. Since Mi moved to South Korea, she gained about 20 pounds, which she described as a result of the stress that she was experiencing in South Korea:

[A few years after I came to South Korea,] I started to feel emotionally devastated for some reason. I felt really lonely and had this feeling of emptiness in my mind. I never felt happy. Because of all these compounded feelings, I didn't even want to live anymore. Then, you know, when people feel desperate, they seek for something to make themselves feel better or happier? For me, that was eating. I ate a lot whenever I felt unhappy or lonely. I think, I felt content when I was eating.

As Mi gained weight, she was not happy with her body image. Thus, she decided to lose weight by taking diet pills, which worked well for her. Over time, Mi lost all the weight that she gained and became even thinner than she was before. However, as she lost her weight, Mi became physically and psychologically dependent on the diet pills. Mi told me that she felt extremely

depressed when she tried to stop taking the pills, which made it difficult for her to quit diet pills. She also threw up what she ate almost every day to keep a limit on her daily calorie intake. Since I was concerned about her condition, I recommended that she see a professional counselor to discuss her condition. A few days after our conversation, Mi went to see a counselor. She then came to me to talk about how she was not satisfied with the time she spent with the counselor. Mi did not feel that the counselor—who was South Korean—understood what Mi was going through.

Another student, M.J., a 19-year-old senior, had participated in multiple sessions of counseling programs while she was recovering from her suicide attempt. M.J. shared experiences of being counseled by mental health professionals:

[Previously I had multiple counseling sessions] with South Korean counselors. I felt that the degree of counseling was shallow. When I reflect on the counseling services that I received, I did not feel the degree of authenticity of the counselor, whether the counselor really empathized with my difficulties and situations or not. I believe that healing starts when I feel that the counselors truly understand my situation and empathize with what happened to me.

Feeling that the counselor could not empathize with her, M.J. stopped attending counseling sessions until coming to Hankook school, where she finally met a professional counselor who was also a North Korean refugee herself. Although it is essential for North Korean SRB to be able to access mental health professionals who understand their struggles related to their identity and backgrounds, the number of mental health professionals who share similar backgrounds as North Korean SRB is extremely limited in South Korea.

### **North Korean SRB Perceived as (Dis)abled in Different School Contexts**

In this section, I discuss how students began to internalize their academic performance and behavioral characteristics as an important part of developing and understanding their academic identity in South Korean schools. North Korean SRB that I met at Hankook school described that their understanding about their academic identities shifted as they experienced achievement and failures in different school settings (e.g., North Korean schools, mainstream South Korean schools, alternative schools for North Korean SRB in South Korea). They also expressed that their behavioral characteristics were viewed and supported differently in different school settings. Students reported that positive feedback from teachers as well as participation in various school activities helped them find strengths as a student, whereas repeated failing experiences or being ignored by teachers negatively affected developing their academic identity. Knowing that Hankook school provided more individualized educational supports with a diverse curriculum, several students proactively proceeded to transfer from mainstream schools to Hankook school.

**Academic identities in South Korean schools.** North Korean SRB that I met at Hankook school expressed that academic challenges they experienced in South Korean schools led them to develop a negative academic identity. Several students shared that they were not able to participate in classroom learning activities in mainstream schools because of the differences in curriculum, education system, and/or a lack of long- or short-term formal education. Without receiving appropriate educational supports, several students told me that they attended a classroom for years, while not understanding the content being taught. In so doing, students developed a negative perception about their academic identity, viewing themselves as underachievers or slow learners. Hyang, a 17-year-old senior, explained how her low academic

performance directly led her to undervalue her ability as a learner while attending a mainstream school:

When I attended a regular school, I couldn't understand anything that was taught. I knew nothing in English, math, or Korean history class. Especially in math class, I didn't even know if I solved the problem correctly or not. I had no confidence about myself at all as a student. Because of my low self-esteem, I stopped expressing my opinions at school. I was like an invisible person. I didn't talk to anyone at all in school.

To hide her lack of understanding of the curriculum, Hyang tried to be as unnoticeable as possible to teachers and her peers. However, Hyang recalled herself as being different in North Korea, where she was outgoing and an achieving student in math class:

I don't know about English because we were not taught English in [elementary] school [in North Korea], but I remember I liked math. I think I had a pretty good grade in math.

The perfect score is five in North Korea, and I always got at least 4.5 in math.

Because her father died when she was in the third grade in elementary school, Hyang was not able to continue schooling for a few years until she moved to South Korea. Although Hyang needed extra help to catch up on content and fill in the educational gap, she did not receive any support when she was attending a mainstream school in South Korea. Soon after she started middle school, she finally decided to leave the mainstream school because she felt she was too far behind and did not receive the support she needed to understand the material.

Mi, a 21-year-old senior, had a similar experience as Hyang. Mi initially attended a mainstream middle and high school for three years after her relocation to South Korea. In her senior year in a mainstream high school, however, Mi decided to transfer to Hankook school

because she felt that she was academically too far behind her peers. When asked to describe her strengths, Mi viewed her strengths based on her experience in mainstream schools:

North Korean kids are not good at anything, so to speak. In South Korea, you have to be really exceptional to be able to say that you are good at something. Because South Korean kids are way advanced in many areas, I don't have anything to say as strengths compared to them. I don't even know what I like.

Mi evaluated her strengths and weaknesses by comparing herself to the academic performance of the average South Korean students that she observed in mainstream schools. Mi used to consider English language a strength in her school subjects. However, her perception about her strengths in school subjects shifted over time since she moved to South Korea:

I was confident with my English. I thought I was good at English subject in North Korea. But, since I came to South Korea, my test scores marked really low in every subject, including English... You know, I like English, so I wanted to continue studying and find a job in English field. But realistically, I can't get a job with my English ability. I don't think I can, because there are so many people who are good at English in South Korea.

After Mi relocated to South Korea, she realized that her strength in English still did not meet South Korean standards. Mi expressed that she could not be satisfied with herself in schools because she constantly compared her academic performance to that of South Korean peers. As a result, Mi expressed that she never felt confident with herself as a student when attending mainstream schools because she did not experience academic achievement exceeding her South Korean peers.

In contrast to her experience in mainstream schools, Mi was able to focus on her strength in English through participating in school activities and events at Hankook school. Mi recalled

that she developed English skills through participating in a school-wide English speech contest at Hankook school a year before we met. Even though she did not receive an award, Mi told me that she learned a lesson while preparing for the speech contest:

Song: You told me that you participated in the English speech contest last year. Tell me about how you decided to participate.

Mi: Initially, I wasn't going to participate, but my English teacher encouraged me to do it. So, I did it. But I didn't receive any award.

Song: Do you think it was a good decision to participate in the contest?

Mi: Yes. I found that speaking in English is very fun, and I began to like it...I realized that my English pronunciation was improved as I practiced.

Song: Did you realize it while you were practicing your speech?

Mi: Yes, my English pronunciation was very bad, even after I came to Hankook school. I liked mimicking something that I listened to or some kind of gestures that I saw.

Watching TV shows or YouTube, something like Hollywood celebrities talking, and they are sitting on a couch, I mimicked how they talked. I found it very fun to imitate how people spoke. And I realized that my pronunciation was getting better while doing so.

Song: Do you think you would have been able to participate in an English speech contest or anything like that if you were in mainstream schools?

Mi: Of course not. Only the students who are really good at English can participate in contests like that. I wasn't able to do anything like that in mainstream schools.

Mi was able to develop a strategy to improve her English pronunciation through participating in the English speech context. Yet, as Mi mentioned, the opportunities to be able to participate in school-wide events are often limited to high-achieving students in most mainstream schools.

Therefore, it is questionable if North Korean SRB would even be given a chance to participate in different academic activities to help them develop a positive academic identity.

Another student, Hyang, a 17-year-old senior, described that she was able to discover her strengths while participating in different school activities after she transferred to Hankook school. Hyang recalled herself not having any strengths when she lived in North Korea. However, as the conversation went on, she shared that she always had talent in dancing and creating something new:

Song: What do you think you were good at when you lived in North Korea?

Hyang: I wasn't good at anything in North Korea.

Song: Even at school?

Hyang: No.

Song: Anything that you think you were good at? It doesn't have to be related to studying or school work.

Hyang: No. I didn't have anything to think of as my strength.

Song: Didn't you say that you were good at making something creative?

Hyang: Yeah, but that's just something that I like to do, like my hobby. So, I don't know if I am really good at that.

Song: When did you figure that out, that you like to create something?

Hyang: Two years after I came to South Korea.

Song: How did you find it out?

Hyang: It was the first semester of my junior year at Hankook school, during the Career and Vocational Guidance Education class. At that time, we were guided to think about what we liked, what we were good at, using survey questions and writing my thoughts.



So, I thought about what I liked to do, what I found interesting and fun, what I was enjoying and what I spent most time on a day...I finally figured out that I liked something creative. I wanted to make creative products in the future. So, I decided to become a scientist who creates something with artificial intelligence. I always liked something very creative, even when I was in North Korea. When I was taught dancing in North Korea, I tried to dance creatively. In South Korea, I hated doing something that's the same as others. I told you before that I like dancing, right? When I dance, I create all the choreography. I created choreography by myself based on popular girl group songs. With her talents in dancing, Hyang performed choreography that she created at talent shows and received several awards at Hankook school. Through actively participating in different activities at Hankook school, Hyang was able to discover what she liked to do and her strengths.

Teacher-student interaction is another important aspect in terms of building positive academic identity for students. Several students reported that positive interaction with teachers helped them build a positive academic identity in schools. M.J. shared her experience with teachers at Hankook school, which helped her recognize her strengths as a student:

M.J.: I began to realize that I have steadiness in doing something. I don't know if I am good at it, but I think that is my strength. I am a hard worker, once I decide to do something.

Song: Did you know that it was your strength in North Korea?

M.J.: No, I didn't even know that was my strength until pretty recently because no one recognized it as my strength, including myself...But, now I think my biggest strength is being diligent and steady when I do something.

Song: How did you figure that out?

M.J.: They kept telling me that those are my strengths.

Song: Who told you that?

M.J.: My homeroom teacher.

Song: Did other teachers tell you about it also?

M.J.: So did Ms. Yeon [vice-principal]. I think those two [working diligently and steadily] are my strengths as well as what I am good at.

I observed how hardworking M.J. was during my time at Hankook school. She participated in a school-wide English speech contest which took place a few weeks after my arrival at school. I volunteered to help students who were participating in the contest and M.J. was one of them. She frequently approached me to ask for help from me during lunch breaks or even after school. She continued practicing and earned first place in the contest. To better communicate with students, teachers used several different strategies. For example, students at Hankook school were given a weekly planning book to help them document and plan their academic progress. Every week, teachers gave each student written feedback, using this planning book. Through this written feedback, teachers could listen to student concerns and give more in-depth feedback, which M.J. and several other students (Sue, Hyang) identified as a meaningful way of communicating with teachers.

However, M.J. told me that she held a very reserved and submissive role as a student in mainstream schools, and she did not recognize her strengths. It was astonishing to listen to M.J.'s story about how her understanding about her academic identity shifted depending on her interaction with teachers. M.J. shared her experience with teachers whom she met in mainstream schools:

Song: Did teachers tell you what your strengths were when you attended a mainstream school?

M.J.: No, they didn't care about me. Probably, they didn't even notice that I was their student... Teachers were bothered by me because North Korean students, like myself, need to go through more complicated process and have to submit more paperwork [than South Korean students] when applying for a scholarship, for example. Thus, we need more help from teachers. Teachers appeared to be pretty bothered by me whenever I asked them for help. Of course, there were nice teachers, but I guess, six out of ten teachers that I met made me feel like I was bothering them... I was craving affection at that time, so I needed more attention and care from teachers. However, I knew that no teacher was interested in me. That kind of experience made me feel let down.

Song: Even your homeroom teachers?

M.J.: No. they didn't care about me.

Even though M.J. wanted more attention from teachers in her mainstream school, she told me that she could not approach her teachers because of the fear that her teachers might find her bothersome. And this fear of rejection resulted from her previous interactions with other teachers. Gradually, M.J. developed a negative understanding about her identity as a North Korean SRB and adopted a reserved role in school.

Through several interviews with students, I learned that every student had different educational experiences which either helped or hindered them from developing positive academic identities. Experiencing success through meaningful participation in school activities and positive student-teacher interaction played important roles for developing positive academic

identities. In other words, depending on the school contexts or relationship with teachers, one could view her/himself as a capable learner who can see their potential grow.

**Emotional and behavioral characteristics of North Korean SRB.** Through my interviews with students, I learned that many students at Hankook school exhibited or had histories of exhibiting behaviors that they described as aggressive, or that were interpreted as aggressive or challenging by teachers and peers. During my time at Hankook school, I observed an incident in which several students were engaged in a fist fight, which led teachers to call an emergency school board meeting. When such incidents happened outside of school, teachers were called from a local police station or a hospital to handle the situation. Ms. Lee recalled her experience taking care of students who were involved in physical fights over the last few years at Hankook school:

There used to be a lot of incidents caused by our students, something like students were physically fighting against each other. They were the cases of school violence. I [including other teachers] was often called from the local police stations as well as an emergency room from a hospital because our students got hurt from fighting against each other. It has become a lot better now. Now, it is like a school. I would say, it used to be like a battle field here.

Through a decade of handling situations that involves students' "aggressive" behaviors, teachers at Hankook school became more understanding of situations that students were handling. Ms. Yeon, the vice principal at Hankook school, explained struggles that students experienced after multiple border crossings and relocation to South Korea:

Students have a hard time digesting their experience of being treated unfairly and inhumanely [in North Korea or in China]. Because there is no one to blame for how they

were treated, our students feel even more resentment and pain once they arrive in South Korea. Students don't know how to express their resentment or emotion. Thus, they sometimes target their anger towards others or even towards themselves by showing aggressive behaviors.

While learning how to manage their emotions, some students exhibited behaviors engaging in physical fights within and outside of school. The tendency to show "aggressive" behaviors, however, diminished as students matured and began to adjust to living in South Korea. I sometimes observed students and teachers joking about how different the students used to be when they first came to Hankook school. Jung, a 19-year-old senior, used to be one of the "trouble makers" who exhibited a series of "aggressive" behaviors. Jung recalled his first year at Hankook school:

My friends and teachers often tell me that I have become a totally different person now.

In my first year at Hankook school [three years ago], I used to get upset very easily for nothing. I used to yell at my classmates, throw desks and chairs, kick and punch furniture in the classroom. My friends were very afraid of me at that time.

Jung admitted that he was emotionally unstable when he first transferred to Hankook school. He used to have difficulty with managing his temper. However, Jung gained composure as time went by. While in China, Jung had to restrain himself to hide his North Korean nationality and avoid deportation. However, without fear of deportation at Hankook school in South Korea, Jung exposed his emotions through his behavior. Jung expressed that his behavior gradually changed after he found and focused on pursuing his dream as a professional Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fighter.

North Korean SRB who were expelled from or chose to leave mainstream schools may have been characterized by their teachers as having behavioral or emotional problems. However, in Hankook school, teachers expressed that it became hard to blame students for their behavior, after knowing each student's background. Since many students experienced emotional or behavioral ups and downs themselves, teachers appeared to be patient and empathetic with their students' conditions. Mr. Song, who has been teaching at Hankook school for more than ten years, shared his experience of working with students who he described as exhibiting challenging behaviors. Witnessing conflicts between students over time, Mr. Song began to better understand the struggles that each student was facing:

It was heart breaking to watch my students fighting against each other. Although they had to be supportive of each other as a member of a minority group in South Korea, they were doing the opposite. I was too sad to witness them showing such behaviors. Watching them fighting, I sometimes had to leave my classroom crying. I had a hard time because of my students. However, as time went by and as I learned more about my students' backgrounds, I began to better understand them, why they show such behaviors. As I learn more about my students and gained experiences of working with them, they became a big support for me.

Another teacher at Hankook school, Mr. Choi, shared his experience of interacting with each student. Mr. Choi expressed that he began to better understand each student's struggle through in-depth conversations with individual students:

There are many North Korean students who were separated from their family during their refugee journey. One of my students got trafficked when she went to make money to help her parents be released from jail. Luckily, she got to escape and was able to come to

South Korea... another student shared her situation that her father in North Korea was sick but couldn't afford to go to a hospital. Knowing that her father was sick, this student couldn't do anything here in South Korea.

During my time at Hankook school, I was also able to observe that teachers were deeply aware of what each student was struggling with. Students constantly shared their stories and struggles with their teachers during recess, lunch time, or after school. When students exhibited unusual behaviors, teachers often knew what was going on with the student's life and they tried to help the student resolve issues as much as they could. The in-depth understanding about each student's background helped both teachers and students perceive students' "challenging behavior" as a temporary reaction to their circumstances, rather than label students as emotionally or behaviorally challenged.

**Qualities that North Korean SRB bring to classrooms.** North Korean SRB whom I met at Hankook school had a wide range of experiences as refugees as well as North Koreans, leading them to develop diverse attributes. The skills that students developed through their diverse life experiences include a sense of money management, independent decision-making, and/or physical and psychological resilience as a business owner, farmer, or construction worker. However, these qualities and skills, which North Korean SRB brought with them, were not often recognized as strengths or competencies in the context of South Korean schools. Rather, students often began to focus on the qualities and skills they were missing based on their test scores or academic performance because that was the message they received in school. In this section, I first introduce diverse skills and qualities that several students at Hankook school gained through their experience as North Korean refugees. Then, I illustrate how these skills and qualities were neglected or, in some cases, were recognized as strengths depending on different school contexts.

***Diverse life experiences and skills of North Korean SRB.*** Jin, a 17-year-old freshman, was one of the students in my English tutoring session who was a peddler until she left North Korea. Living in North Korea, Jin brought in commodities from China and sold them in different towns, traveling by bicycle for dozens of miles every day. She knew exactly where to go to find the right customers to sell her products. Through her experience in North Korea, Jin learned the nature of a market economy and money management as an independent financial supporter for herself and her family. Another student that I met mentioned that she became skilled in skinning animals and taking care of livestock in North Korea. Moon, a 22-year-old freshman, became a fluent Mandarin speaker after spending ten years in China as a refugee. I often observed him talking to his classmates both in Korean and Chinese language depending on whom he was speaking to. Because of his fluent Chinese language skill, Moon was often assumed by his peers to have been born in China. Other than gaining foreign language skills, Moon also recalled how his various working experiences in China helped him become a more mature and flexible person:

Song: What do you think the takeaways are from your time in China? Do you think it was helpful for you?

Moon: I think so. I met so many different people and had so many different experiences for ten years in China. I could never forget the experience that I had in China for the rest of my life. I learned the hard way not to trust people easily. I also met many people whom I felt grateful for. Because of the ten years of experience in China, I have developed my own way of thinking and decision making that is different from other people's. I think ten years of time in China is really important to me...I became very good at adapting myself to new environments. I adjust myself very well wherever I go.

Song: Were you always like that?



Moon: No, the ten years of time in China made me become flexible.

Song: Oh, really? So, you didn't have that flexibility when you first went to China?

Moon: I had to work in new environments since I was young. When I quit my job and then found another job, I had to adjust myself to a new environment again. If I couldn't adjust myself to a new environment, I had to leave the job. Then, I couldn't make money. Because of my experience in China, I became very good at adjusting myself to a new environment.

Song: How do you find adjusting in South Korea?

Moon: Living in South Korea is not like living in a different world. It is the same wherever you go.

As Moon described, his experience as a refugee in China helped him become a more capable and mature person. I observed several teachers complementing his mature personality and performance at school. Moon often volunteered to organize and clean up school facilities when there was a meeting. He expressed that he is not afraid of changes in his life and that he wanted to go abroad to learn English once he becomes a college student. He had a firm plan to master three languages in the future.

Another student, Jung, a 19-year-old senior, explained that he learned a valuable lesson through his refugee experience in China. Even though it was a painful time for him, Jung found his experience in China eventually helped him develop physical and psychological resilience:

I think there are more cons than pros when I recall my time in China. The cons are, I caught a disease, I got depression, and I began to fear interacting with people, and stuff like that. But the pro is that I developed a very strong mentality, like a mental strength. [Whenever I encounter some difficulties in South Korea] I thought to myself that I've

survived under such an oppressive condition in China. Why not here in South Korea?

Because of my strong mentality, my colleagues at the UFC training center often comment on me that I have a great mental strength, which I agree with.

Physical and mental resilience was an essential quality for Jung to possess as a professional UFC fighter. Jung attributed the growth of his resilience to his refugee experience, which helped him continue the rigorous training to become a UFC fighter.

Several students identified various tangible and intangible qualities or skills as their strengths: creativity (Hyang); steadiness and diligence (M.J.); physical and psychological resilience (Jung); and Chinese language skill, diligence, and maintaining higher standards for working (Moon). Other students whose conversations were not included in this chapter also identified that they had developed organizing skills (Mi) and social skills (Sue) through their refugee experiences or during their time in North Korea. However, students also expressed that these qualities were not viewed as strengths in many school settings. Instead, students' academic achievement was emphasized over other attributes. The examples of the attributes that students bring to schools are important qualities for one's life, which may be more important than academic performance in the long run. However, an emphasis on students' test scores and academic performance neglects valuable attributes that students have developed through their diverse life experience. As a result, students who do not demonstrate academic accomplishments at mainstream schools, such as Mi and Hyang in this study, began to understand themselves as "delayed" or "behind" students when compared with their South Korean peers. Overall, the voices of these students demonstrate the importance of recognizing diverse attributes and qualities that students with refugee backgrounds bring into schools, as a means to help them build positive academic identities.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how North Korean SRB began to embody physical and mental health difficulties through their refugee experiences and after their relocation to South Korean society and schools. Experiencing a series of adversities through their refugee journey and discrimination in South Korean schools and society, students came to embody different physical or mental health issues. Thus, receiving professional physical and mental health support was essential for students to better manage their physical or mental health conditions after a dangerous refugee journey. However, the limited number of mental health professionals who share similar backgrounds and identity as North Korean SRB remained a barrier for students who are in need of mental health support.

The examples of students' experiences discussed in this chapter also demonstrated the nuances of how North Korean SRB were seen as (dis)abled in the context of schooling where they took on a stigmatized identity. Students expressed that meaningful participation in school activities and positive interactions with teachers made a great impact on developing positive academic identities. Depending on the school context and teachers' efforts to better serve students, each student participant had varying degrees of educational experiences, which affected building their academic identity. In addition, students' behavior was also viewed through a different lens depending on the school setting. While North Korean SRB who exhibited "emotional or behavioral challenges" were often stigmatized in mainstream schools, similar behaviors were viewed as part of the transitioning to South Korea in Hankook school. The in-depth understanding about students' backgrounds helped both teachers and students create positive changes in students' behaviors that were previously often described as challenging or problematic.

At Hankook school, students and teachers' understanding about psychological disorder or emotional or behavioral issues followed social model of understanding disability. For example, several teachers described the psychological and emotional distress that students experienced as *conditions* that change over time. Although a few teachers used the term "disability" and listed names of psychological disorders to describe characteristics or symptoms related to particular disorders, they expressed that students' conditions had been alleviated or eliminated as students received appropriate supports and professional treatments. Student participants also shared that they viewed their peers' "challenging" behaviors as characteristic of transitioning to a new society and school system. Because students experienced difficulties transitioning to South Korean society themselves, they tended to hold emic perspective when their peers exhibited psychological or behavioral issues.

In chapter four and five, I discussed how North Korean SRB understand the shift of their own identity as they transitioned from a refugee to a legal citizen of South Korea. In the next chapter, I discuss philosophical approaches and practices that students, teachers, and school leaders at Hankook school identified, including practices that supported students to adopt a view of themselves as "normal" members of school community. By sharing the philosophical approaches and practices at Hankook school, I will expand my discussion to consider what implications the data from Hankook school can offer for alternative environments that promote inclusive education.

## **Chapter Six:**

### **Feeling Accepted at Hankook School**

In the previous two chapters, I discussed how North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) understand their identity and characteristics in relation to their refugee experiences and relocation to South Korea. I also discussed how (dis)ability was constructed and experienced for North Korean SRB in the context of South Korean schools. In this chapter, I discuss findings related to the third research question of this study: How do students, teachers, and school leaders who attend or work for an alternative school for North Korean SRB in South Korea describe the philosophical approaches and practices used in their school? To answer this question, I introduce three main themes based on the analysis of the data: 1) curriculum and teaching practices reflecting students' diverse educational backgrounds, 2) the role of student-teacher relationships, and 3) the significance of attending or teaching in an alternative school, in which North Korean SRB are separated from their South Korean peers.

Each main theme comprises several sub-themes. For the first main theme, I discuss how teachers develop curricula that reflect students' educational and cultural backgrounds. I also include examples of instructional practices that teachers used to refer to students' North Korean refugee backgrounds at the school. In the second main theme, I describe how the relationship between students and teachers is essential for academic success and communal participation for North Korean SRB. I introduce examples of mentoring strategies that teachers at Hankook school used to develop positive relationships with students. In the last main theme, I discuss how teachers and students describe the significance of the school environment, as it relates to being separate from mainstream South Korean schools. This section includes a discussion of how teachers and students understand the school's philosophical approach as a Christian mission

school. The findings of this chapter come from my analysis of interview transcripts with nine teachers and six students, observation fieldnotes, journals, information on the school's website, and textbooks published by teachers at Hankook school. In addition to students' and teachers' insights about the unique educational practices and philosophies of Hankook school, I also include my observational analysis.

### **How Students' Backgrounds Are Reflected at Hankook School**

At Hankook school, I observed several approaches and strategies which highlight students' backgrounds as North Korean refugees or those with North Korean heritage. Strategies that I observed included: 1) reflecting students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds in the curriculum, 2) highlighting students' backgrounds as an asset or strength, and 3) hiring teachers and visiting professionals who share similar North Korean backgrounds and identity as their students. I first discuss how teachers at Hankook school created curricula to support students who have diverse educational backgrounds. I then introduce examples of educational philosophies and practices that recognize students' backgrounds and experiences as strengths. Finally, I discuss how students and teachers described the role of school teachers and visiting professionals who shared similar North Korean refugee backgrounds as the students.

**Reflecting students' educational backgrounds in the curriculum.** North Korean SRB at Hankook school have educational backgrounds and experiences that vary significantly from one another. Among the student participants, for example, M.J. had missed nine months of formal education, whereas Moon had not received any education for ten years since he left North Korea in second grade. To accommodate students' different educational backgrounds, teachers developed and implemented flexible curricula and teaching strategies. For instance, although Hankook school was authorized as a high school, the school provided a class for students who

needed to pass the nationwide examination to obtain an elementary and middle school diploma. Once students pass the elementary and middle school diploma exam, they finally started the high school curriculum. Because of students' diverse educational backgrounds, students' ages also varied from 15 to 25 in the same classroom, as opposed to mainstream schools that have students of the same or similar age in each class.

Curriculum development in Hankook school was deliberately intended to reflect students' different educational and cultural backgrounds. For example, teachers at Hankook school developed their own textbooks in subjects including Korean Language Arts (KLA), Korean history, and Social Studies. Ms. Young, a KLA teacher, explained that creating her own textbooks was a way to address the diverse background of her students:

In terms of teaching KLA in high school, South Korean students usually have foundational knowledge through their education in elementary and middle schools. But most of our students don't have such experiences in South Korean elementary and middle schools. Thus, it is challenging for many of them to follow the high school KLA curriculum right away. So, we've been making our own textbooks that are not too difficult for our students, while including main elements that high school students are required to learn. I am not sure if I can call them high-quality textbooks, but we [teachers] tried hard to incorporate educational characteristics and backgrounds that our students bring to our school as well as our expertise when making textbooks.

In most mainstream schools, students were taught with textbooks developed based on the national curriculum. However, these textbooks do not reflect students' different cultural and educational backgrounds. Therefore, mainstream textbooks were not ideal materials for many students at Hankook school.

Another reason teachers created their own textbooks at Hankook school was because of differences in North and South Korean curricula and content knowledge in North and South Korean education. Even though North and South Korean students speak Korean language, the content and methods with which students were taught in KLA classes differed. Ms. Young described differences in how KLA is taught between North and South Korean schools, which she learned through teaching students at Hankook school:

I checked out North Korean [KLA] textbooks. The contents in the North Korean textbooks were very abstract, propagandizing of the regime, and impractical. In the South Korean KLA class, we focus on teaching students to be able to write practical essays, like expository writing, making arguments, or reading newspaper articles and literature. Even literature in North Korean textbooks, everything was all fake, praising Kim's [Leader Kim Jong-il] family and those who are related to Kim's family. Even poetry was very inflammatory. Also, I was surprised to learn that there was no concept of paragraph in North Korean KLA textbooks. When I first came to Hankook school, I taught writing to my students and I was surprised to see our students' writing style. They would write one sentence then changed lines to write the next sentence... I couldn't understand why students wrote this way until I checked North Korean KLA textbooks. In North Korean textbooks, there were no paragraphs and it was written a sentence after a sentence in different lines. Our students were taught to write like that in North Korea.

Ms. Young continued to explain that students were taught to think and write differently in the North and South Korean education systems. Analyzing North Korean textbooks and curricula helped Ms. Young better understand students' learning backgrounds and characteristics with which she was not familiar. It also reminded her that students may and will have different prior



knowledge than she assumed. Ms. Young also explained that teachers in the KLA department at Hankook school collectively worked together to create a teaching manual for teaching North Korean SRB. In this manual, teachers included effective teaching strategies for North Korean SRB based on their experience and students' learning characteristics.

**Helping students unlearn and relearn.** Teachers at Hankook also attempted to have students unlearn and relearn what they were taught in North Korean schools. For example, there were significant differences in content knowledge in Social Studies and Korean history curricula in North and South Korean schools. Mr. Song, a Social Studies teacher at Hankook school, explained the differences in Social Studies between North and South Korean schools:

Song: I heard that students learn the history of Kim's family in Social Studies class in North Korea.

Mr. Song: Yes, that subject is called "Political ideology" in North Korea but it is not considered as Social Studies in South Korea...In terms of the subject of Ethics, they have something called "Communist Ethics" in North Korean schools. The curriculum includes moral education and the contents related to worshiping Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

Basically, a Social Studies subject that we can call equivalent to South Korean Social Studies doesn't exist at the high school level in North Korea. Geography may be the only common subject between the North and the South, but a lot of information of the Geography curriculum is distorted.

Mr. Song further explained that the curriculum in Geography in North Korean schools includes the sacred meaning of the Kim family's geographical birth places or North Korea's geographic territory, which are not geographically accurate. Because of the differences in curriculum and content knowledge between North and South Korea, North Korean SRB are expected to learn

totally new knowledge in South Korean schools and unlearn what they had learned in North Korean schools. During this process, North Korean SRB realize that much of what they were taught in North Korean schools was not accurate. Jung, a 19-year-old senior, shared his feeling as he realized that the education that he received in North Korea was a part of “brainwashing”:

Song: What kind of subjects did you learn in North Korean schools?

Jung: Well, there were many different subjects like KLA, English, math, things like that. But the subject that we had to study hardest was the history of the greatest leader, Kim Jong-il, and his mother, Kim Jong-suk. Recalling it now, it is the most ludicrous thing to learn.

Song: Did you have to memorize their history in that subject?

Jung: Yes, it was okay to get low grades in other subjects like English or KLA, but if you get low grades in the history of Kim’s family, you get in trouble [deep sigh]. Since we were brainwashed a lot [in North Korean schools].

Song: When did you realize that [the curriculum] was part of brainwashing?

Jung: I didn’t know until I came to South Korea. In South Korea, things were so different from what I thought [in North Korea].

As Jung experienced, other student participants (e.g., Mi, M.J., Hyang, and Sue) also expressed that they encountered perspectives upon arrival in South Korea, which made them feel that some or most of what they were taught in North Korean schools was not accurate. Therefore, they had to relearn the same subjects with totally different content knowledge to meet the standards of South Korean education.

In addition to differences in content knowledge and curriculum, North Korean SRB found it difficult to adjust to different teaching and learning styles in South Korean schools.

According to Mr. Ju and Ms. Lee who experienced the North Korean education system, students were often encouraged to act as passive and obedient recipients of knowledge in North Korean schools. However, in South Korean schools, they were expected to participate in classroom discussions or raise questions to the teacher. Mr. Ju, a Social Studies teacher and an alumnus of Hankook school, explained his experience as a North Korean SRB himself, as well as teaching North Korean SRB in South Korea:

It was not easy to get used to the different curriculum and educational environments in the North and South Korean education systems. For example, in South Korean schools, teachers gave instructions about something, and then they asked questions to students, instead of teachers lecturing the whole time like in North Korean schools. When North Korean students first came to South Korean schools and saw this situation, we [North Korean students] often thought teachers were asking questions to students because teachers didn't prepare for their lesson enough or they were not qualified enough to teach.

As Mr. Ju mentioned, North Korean SRB, especially those who were new to South Korean school culture, found it challenging to get accustomed to the teaching styles. Students in North and South Korean schools were also encouraged to develop different perspectives about social and historical issues. For example, the same historical events were described and taught differently in Korean history classes in North and South Korean schools. Mr. Ju showed me an example of how the same historical event could be taught differently:

For example, let's say, we are teaching the March First Movement<sup>26</sup> or Uprisings of Peasants [in the late Joseon Dynasty]. In South Korean schools, teachers teach these

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<sup>26</sup> Korea's independence movement during the Japanese occupation in Korea, which occurred on March 1, 1919.

events as voluntary movements by the general public and evaluate these events as positive historical movements. However, in North Korean textbooks, these historical events were described as failed movements because of a lack of leadership...They [North Korean teachers] teach that only the leaders who have charisma, like the greatest leader Kim, can lead the country for a better history.

According to Mr. Ju, students in North Korea were prohibited from criticizing or analyzing social and political systems. Students were not encouraged to develop a critical way of thinking, nor were they allowed to express critical ideas. North Korean SRB who were accustomed to this kind of school culture found it difficult when they were asked to criticize social issues or taught about different perspectives about the same historical events in South Korean schools. Mr. Ju shared his experience of teaching students about Korean historical events:

When explaining the Uprisings of Peasants in late Joseon Dynasty, students, especially those who were newly relocated to South Korea, would react like, “Aren’t they [the South Korean teachers] afraid of being arrested? How come they don’t follow what they were told to do [by the authority]? Don’t they have to follow the order [from the authority]?”

Mr. Ju continued that it takes time for North Korean SRB to develop their own perspectives to critically evaluate social or historical issues as they begin to understand that people can have different opinions and perspectives towards the same issue. Therefore, it was important for North Korean SRB to receive instructions to be able to develop a different way of thinking in South Korean schools.

Reflecting students’ different learning and educational backgrounds, teachers at Hankook school used various strategies to help students develop critical thinking. These approaches

included asking students to research information, create arguments, and participate in discussions. For example, in the Korean history classes that I observed, students were required to present their research projects on certain historical events. In pairs, students researched a historical event and presented it in front of the whole class using presentation software. Teachers asked presenters and members of the audience to participate in discussion about the topics being presented. This activity was designed to support students in preparing quality presentations and encourage them to include their own insights about the historical events that they researched. When observing students preparing for their presentations, I noticed that students learned to collaborate by teaching each other how to create their Power Point slides or by explaining the meanings of terms to each other in Korean and Mandarin.

In Social Studies class, students were required to participate in research projects focusing on current issues in South Korean society. Mr. Song, a Social Studies teacher, shared details of this activity and explained why he chose to use this activity every year:

For this activity in my Social Studies class, I provide students with examples of current social or cultural issues, such as LGBT rights, disability rights, suicide, young adults' unemployment issues, and human rights issues in North Korea. Then students choose one topic in which they are interested in researching and presenting. I have been including this activity in my curriculum to help students broaden their understanding [about social and cultural issues]. It seems that some students really understand what I intended to teach and some don't. But, I think students learned more about the issues that they researched through this activity, so I like this activity a lot. Students like this activity as well, even though some of them find it really difficult to prepare.

When presenting, students had to include their opinions about how they understood the issues that they researched. Throughout this activity, students had to organize their thoughts and present supporting evidence and arguments. As Mr. Song mentioned, some students found participating in this activity to be quite challenging. However, many other students liked engaging in discussions. Sue, a 22-year-old senior, explained how she felt about participating in this research project, as well as what she thought of Mr. Song's teaching style, particularly about his encouraging student participation in Social Studies class:

Sue: Mr. Song keeps asking us questions in Social Studies class. Since I like to talk, we often end up having debates.

Song: What kind of questions does he ask students?

Sue: In the first semester, we had to do a research presentation project. Each group, with two to three students, had to research on issues like school bullying, LGBT rights, or something like that, then presented it in class every week. In this activity, we had to create our own presentation [as presenters] as well as raise questions, while listening to other presentations [as audience]. Students who raised good questions received bonus points. Since I wanted to get the bonus points and I also became curious to know more about the topics, I raised several questions. Then Mr. Song would ask me, "Why do you think so?" Mr. Song doesn't talk much, but his questions are very critical. He often helps us realize what we didn't know or understand. He is very knowledgeable, so he provides us with a lot of background information about the topics that we presented. If there was something that we didn't include in the presentations, he gives us more details about it. I really like his teaching style a lot.

In Korean history and Social Studies classes, students were required to participate in the types of research presentation projects described by Sue, and which I observed. Each presentation was followed by a class discussion. Students were encouraged to think critically and practice verbalizing their own opinions in front of their peers and teachers. Through this activity, students demonstrated a willingness to be involved in shaping the curriculum by creating their own presentations and exchanging perspectives with their peers.

**Providing individualized educational support.** Several students who used to attend mainstream schools reported that the main reason for transferring to Hankook school was for the increased individualized educational support provided by teachers at Hankook school. Hyang described that she had to fight with her mother to convince her to allow her to transfer to Hankook school because Hyang was aware of the school's reputation of providing individualized educational support:

Song: How did you decide to transfer to Hankook school?

Hyang: I had no idea [to transfer to another school] before. In my middle school as time went by, the curriculum was becoming more and more difficult, and I couldn't follow the school work. I had arguments with my mother for a while because I wanted to transfer to Hankook school and she didn't want me to leave.

Song: Did you know about Hankook school at that time?

Hyang: I didn't know in the beginning, but then, my cousin went to Hankook school. She is an alumna here. I knew that she went to Hankook school and I heard that students can learn the very basics at Hankook school. So, I bothered my mom a lot to let me go to Hankook school.

Song: Why did your mother oppose you?

Hyang: First of all, it is too far from my mom's house, so we wouldn't be able to see each other often. Also, she thought that nothing would change even after I transfer to Hankook school because I was doing nothing [did not study] at that time.

After Hyang learned about the school's reputation that teachers were good at helping students learn the very basics, she tried hard to persuade her mother to give her permission to transfer from a mainstream school to Hankook school. Hyang's mother, however, was skeptical about her transferring to Hankook school because she did not expect anything would change considering Hyang's academic performance at the mainstream school at that time. To her surprise, Hyang began to show interest in her school work at Hankook School as she was able to access scaffolded and individualized educational support.

Mi, a 21-year-old senior, also chose to transfer to Hankook school because she had been falling behind academically. After transferring to Hankook school, Mi recounted that she began to experience a feeling of accomplishment, which she rarely felt while attending mainstream schools. Mi never thought that she would be able to understand math until coming to Hankook school:

Mi: My least favorite subject was math in North Korea. I was really bad at math. I sometimes got zero points out of five [five was the perfect score in North Korea] in math tests.

Song: Has your most favorite or least favorite subject been changed since you came to South Korea?

Mi: Well, I found math more and more fun as I learned it at Hankook school. As you know, teachers here teach everything from the very basic and easy stuff. As I learned math here, I got better grades on math tests. I realized that math is a fun subject for the



first time in my life here. Math is very logical, and I like that there are always certain answers in math.

Since the instruction was scaffolded based on students' educational level, Mi was able to learn math from the basics that she needed to learn, instead of following the national curriculum. Mi also expressed that she gained confidence about herself as a student through experiencing academic accomplishments at Hankook school, which was never the case when she was attending mainstream schools. Mr. Choi explained how such intense educational support could be provided to individual students at Hankook school:

Teachers here do not let students fall behind. If necessary, teachers encourage students to join afterschool programs or match them with tutors or mentors who can give individual educational support after school. This kind of service is not possible in mainstream schools. I sometimes think that I could have had a better school life if I received such supports in my school years.

Mr. Choi reported that students were able to learn the very basics at Hankook school, based on their educational backgrounds and learning pace. However, he also expressed that this kind of educational support is only possible at an alternative school setting. I return to this issue in the concluding chapter.

**Recognizing students' backgrounds as a strength.** One of the main reasons I chose Hankook school as my research site was the school's stated philosophy of viewing students' North Korean refugee background or North Korean heritage status as "an asset instead of weakness." The school leaders and teachers set the educational goals of fostering students to become leaders in a post-unified Korean society. Teachers and school leaders also highlighted student leadership because they viewed North Korean SRB as future leaders in a unified Korean

society. This emphasis on fostering future leaders, and the educational philosophy—“fostering human resources for Korea’s unification”—that was advertised on the school’s website, attracted Sue to transfer to the school. Even though Sue was aware of the negative reputation about the school as a place where “maladjusted kids gather,” she recounted that her understanding about the school changed after she began attending. She particularly appreciated the school curriculum that included various educational programs and activities. As she spent more time at Hankook school, Sue admitted that the negative reputation of the school was not accurate.

During my time at Hankook school, I frequently observed teachers and school leaders continuously highlighting students’ backgrounds during instruction or mentoring students on a daily basis. The school’s principal, Mr. Kang, also highlighted that the overall goal of Hankook school is to help students envision themselves as leaders in a post-unified Korean society. Mr. Ju, a teacher and an alumnus of Hankook school, expressed how he has been highlighting students’ backgrounds as North Korean refugees when speaking about Korea’s unification in class, in particular:

In terms of educating students for Korea’s unification, I emphasize the importance of having experiences in both North and South Korean societies. I tell my students to learn new knowledge and culture in South Korea based on their experience and education that they had in North Korea, instead of assimilating into South Korean culture and society. This way, our students [North Korean SRB] will have their unique specialty as a person who experienced both societies and will be able to take an important role in post-unified Korean society.

Mr. Ju viewed his students’ refugee experiences as an asset which will become a unique attribute to have as a future leader in post-unified Korean society. Mr. Ju further encouraged students not

to lose their identity and experiences that they had in North Korea. Mr. Ju believed that the education and experiences that students had in North Korea are as important as those in South Korea. He carefully shared his critiques about the current rhetoric about unification held by other teachers in the school as well as in South Korean society at large:

I am a little concerned about what I will share with you because it might be taken out of context when recorded and be misunderstood. First of all, probably about 90 percent of South Korean people assume that they will have unification by absorption [and] led by South Korea, because South Korea is more developed and wealthier. And, they [South Koreans] don't want to give up this kind of nice things, such as democracy and capitalism, and neither do I. South Koreans think they are better [than North Koreans]...I agree that we, North Koreans in South Korea, have very important roles [in terms of Korea's unification]. Because of us, South Korean people began to know more about North Korea. However, I am not sure if South Koreans learned about North Korea. I think North Koreans who relocated to South Korea have become immersed into South Korean culture. It is no wonder North Koreans got immersed into South Korean culture, since we are minorities in South Korean society. However, unification has to happen as both societies have equal relationship. Therefore, both North and South Korea have to know each other equally.

As a young teacher with North Korean refugee background and a minority among the school faculty community, Mr. Ju was aware that the majority of teachers had a different perspective about unification and the role of North Korean SRB. However, he pointed out that most teachers do not view North Korea as a stakeholder that plays an equal role with South Korea in the discussion of unification.

As Mr. Ju mentioned, several teachers at Hankook school implicitly and explicitly expressed their understanding about the role of North Korean SRB in a unified Korea as those who can help people in North Korea with South Korea's "advanced" educational, economic, and political system. Mr. Choi, a teacher and a pastor serving the school, shared how he understood and emphasized the importance of students' backgrounds as North Korean refugees:

I often tell my students, "Once Korea is unified, who do you think would become leaders in post-unified Korean society to help North Korea to recover? Like the chancellor of Germany, Merkel, she was from East Germany, but she became a leader of the country. You are receiving advanced education in South Korea. As you know, North Korea has not developed as much as South Korea, which means we [South Korea] will have to help them [North Korea] in our way [once we are unified]. In that situation, only you can become leaders who studied in South Korea. What a wonderful opportunity for you."

As Mr. Choi's excerpt indicates, most teachers at Hankook school that I spoke with shared similar viewpoints about the role of North Korean SRB. Teachers and school leaders encouraged students to become future leaders in post-unified Korean society who could bridge South and North Korean society. As Mr. Ju pointed out, it is important to view students as an equal member of the school community and invite them to the discussion of understanding their role.

### **Hiring teachers and school staff who share similar backgrounds as students.**

Hankook school hired a few teachers and mental health professionals who shared similar backgrounds as the students. Among 15 full-time teachers at the school, two teachers (Ms. Lee and Mr. Ju) and one of the visiting mental health counselors (Dr. Yoo, a professional counselor) were from North Korea. In interviews, several teachers and students highlighted the importance of having teachers and visiting professionals who shared the same North Korean refugee

backgrounds with students. When students were faced with challenges related to their refugee backgrounds, both teachers and Dr. Yoo became great resources and supporters who were able to provide authentic advice to students based on their experiences as North Korean refugees. The existence of teachers who have refugee experience was also important for students with North Korean heritage (students who were born and raised outside of North Korea, mostly in China, by North Korean parent/s). Both Ms. Lee and Mr. Ju became fluent in Mandarin and familiar with Chinese culture through their refugee experiences in China. Therefore, they better understood challenges that many students with North Korean heritage faced in South Korea.

**Ms. Lee.** Formerly a middle school English teacher in North Korea, Ms. Lee was now a school coordinator and a supporting teacher at Hankook school. Similar to many female students at Hankook school, Ms. Lee had experienced many ups and downs during her refugee journey. As soon as she escaped from North Korea, she was captured by brokers who were waiting for female North Korean border crossers near the Chinese border. Then she was sold to a local Chinese man living in a rural area. While living there for several years, she had a son. A few years after living in China, she was finally able to escape from her Chinese “husband” and relocate to South Korea with her son. In Hankook school, Ms. Lee was a great resource, especially for female students who had a similar refugee experience. Female students often asked questions to Ms. Lee when they had difficulties making life decisions. Ms. Lee shared her experience of interacting with students who were struggling with issues related to their refugee experience:

I often talk to my students about my experience because I had already experienced what my students are experiencing. And I had a child in China and relocated to South Korea with my child. Not every student listens to me when I tell them about my experience. But

when students find something in my experience that is connected to theirs, then they find it particularly helpful to listen to me. When one of my students were struggling [because of their child left behind in China], they came to me and asked, “Do you think I should bring my child from China? What should I do?” Then I would share my opinions and answers... These kinds of conversations are helpful especially for female students who are struggling with same issues that I had experienced already. Even though we have several female teachers who are married [and have kids], students sometimes find it difficult to talk about such sensitive issues with them. They usually come to me to discuss issues, if it is related to their refugee experiences as a woman. Because of this reason, I think, my students like me.

Since Ms. Lee expressed that because she understands the struggles that many female students experience, her role as a teacher in Hankook school was particularly important to students. Ms. Lee also reported that her experience as a female refugee who had a child in China and relocated to South Korea helped her better understand students from North Korea as well as those with North Korean heritage:

I was born and went to schools and college in North Korea. I escaped from North Korea like our students did. And I lived in China and had a child there. So, I know what our students experienced. As a mother, I understand the position of my students’ mothers as well as our students. I also understand students from North Korea and those born in China. I got to understand multiple aspects because of my experience and backgrounds.

As Ms. Lee expressed, she shared a lot in common with all the students at Hankook school.

I often observed that Ms. Lee was closely interacting with students regardless of students’ identity, birth place or gender. North Korean SRB, particularly female students, found her to be

supportive and understanding because of her background as a female North Korean refugee who is raising a son with North Korean heritage.

**Mr. Ju.** An alumnus of Hankook school, Mr. Ju became a teacher at the school. He “stayed in hiding” for nine years as a refugee in China. By the time he relocated to South Korea and came to Hankook school, he was in his mid-twenties, much older than his peers. Because of his long refugee experiences in China, he did not expect that he would be able to continue studying after high school in South Korea. Mr. Ju initially thought he would learn a skill and get a job after high school because of the long-term absence of formal education. As Mr. Ju continued studying at Hankook school, however he found it fun to learn and study. Mr. Ju changed his initial plan and applied to college. In college, he faced difficulty in academic work because of his different educational background (e.g., interrupted formal education) from other South Korean college students. Mr. Ju explained that he had to figure out his own way of catching up with the college curriculum:

Mr. Ju: It was really challenging to follow the lectures, especially the courses related to my major, which was Political Diplomacy. My GPA was terrible. Professors were talking about something like, Sartre and other stuff, but I couldn’t understand a thing.

Song: So, what did you do?

Mr. Ju: I kept reading books during and after the semester. If my professor mentioned some books in class, I picked at least one of the books and tried to read it. Although I couldn’t understand deep meaning in the books, I tried to make myself familiar with the big ideas in the books, so that I could better understand what professors say in class.

Mr. Ju shared his experience with students who were preparing for college applications at Hankook school. Mr. Ju and several other alumni of Hankook school collaboratively wrote a

book sharing their post-secondary experiences. The school leaders helped publish the book and distributed it to students at Hankook school. In the book, Mr. Ju and other alumni wrote about how they developed their own strategies to become an advocate for themselves. In addition to sharing his experience in college, Mr. Ju also reported that he often shared his nine years of experience as a refugee in China with his students, especially for students with North Korean heritage:

I often share my refugee experience in China, because we have many students who were born in China whose mothers are North Korean refugees. I also lived in China for nine years. Mothers of these students had similar experiences as me, like living in hiding, being discriminated while living in China, and some of them actually had been caught and deported to North Korea. I try to help my students understand why their mothers brought them all the way to South Korea. I often tell my students, “Despite having such dangerous experiences, they brought you here because they love you guys.”

In contrast to North Korean SRB who had experienced an arduous refugee journey, students with North Korean heritage<sup>27</sup> found it difficult to understand the challenges that their parents—mostly mothers—may have faced as refugees in China. Several years of separation from their mothers often resulted in emotional tension even after they reunited with their mothers in South Korea. Knowing that many students with North Korean heritage face challenges developing emotional connections with their mothers in South Korea, Mr. Ju tried to help students understand their mothers by sharing his own refugee experience in China as much as he could.

**Dr. Yoo.** Dr. Yoo is a professional counselor who has been serving students at Hankook school for several years. Through the school website, I was aware that the school provided

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<sup>27</sup> Students with North Korean heritage were born and lived in China as legal Chinese citizens until coming to South Korea.



support to improve students' physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing through counseling and art therapy. However, I did not know that one of the visiting mental health professionals was a North Korean refugee until I had interviews with students and teachers. By the time I heard about Dr. Yoo, it was the end of the semester after all the counseling and therapy sessions were over, which made it difficult for me to invite her as an interview participant. However, I was able to collect information about Dr. Yoo through interviews with students and teachers, as well as articles and lectures that she published.

Dr. Yoo was a medical doctor in North Korea and relocated to South Korea with her family about ten years ago. In South Korea, she understood the necessity of helping North Koreans living in South Korea who had been traumatized under the oppressive regime in North Korea. This desire to help led her to pursue her doctorate in counseling and theology. Since then, she has been working as a professional counselor with North Korean refugees and refugee youth in South Korea. Among the six student participants in this study, two of them—M.J. and Hyang—received counseling services. Both students shared that they exhibited symptoms of depression and other mental health disorders at the time that they transferred to Hankook school. After receiving counseling services from Dr. Yoo, the students expressed that Dr. Yoo made a significant impact on their life, which eventually helped them with their mental health challenges. M.J., a 19-year-old senior, described her mental health condition when she first came to Hankook school:

When I came to Hankook school, I was in a really bad condition, mentally. I had a strong inferiority complex, and I couldn't stop thinking of myself as a weirdo, which hindered me from making relationships with people... It was soon after I attempted suicide, so it was much more difficult to meet people and make friends.

Before coming to Hankook school, M.J. shared that she had received multiple counseling services due to the fact that she had been struggling with several issues related to bullying in mainstream South Korean schools and because of her mental health conditions. However, M.J. expressed that she did not benefit from those services:

Before I came to Hankook school, I received multiple counseling services at different institutions, like Youth Counseling Center and Korean Hana Center when I had a hard time because of the conflicts with my parents and deciding to drop out of school. While receiving counseling services at that time, I could not talk about what I was actually struggling with, like what was hurting me inside. They [counselors] were not able to help me think that I am not a weirdo... Since Dr. Yoo is North Korean herself, I think, she was able to better understand what I was struggling with, like relationship with my parents and other stuff. And I felt more comfortable with her [because she is also from North Korea], I guess.

M.J. mentioned that her life totally changed after having counseling sessions with Dr. Yoo. While sharing her experience of struggling with her mental health conditions and attempting suicide, M.J. expressed that she never thought of being able to share such a private story with anyone else before getting counseling with Dr. Yoo. M.J. told me that being able to receive counseling support from Dr. Yoo was “a blessing from God.”

Hyang, a 17-year-old senior, also shared her experience of receiving counseling service from Dr. Yoo. When I first met Hyang, she was very outgoing and liked to talk to me. However, Hyang told me that she was a totally different person before she received counseling services, which was two years ago. Through two years of the counseling process, Hyang was able to

recognize the emotional pain within herself, which helped her restore the relationship with her mother:

Hyang: [After my father passed away in North Korea], my mom had several boyfriends. I didn't realize that there had been something wrong between me and my mom before I received counseling. I didn't have any conversation with my mom. I didn't talk to her about what I wanted to do or if I was doing well with my friends. When I came home from school, I would say, "I'm home" then, that was it. I used to say nothing to her and neither did my mom.

Song: Did you find yourself changed during or after receiving counseling?

Hyang: Yes, while receiving the counseling, my mom and I tried to change to express our feelings better to each other. Now, I sometimes say "I love you" to my mom. Last year, probably September, my mom called me and said "I love you." It was my first time to hear my mom saying love me. I had goose bumps when I heard that.

Throughout the interview, Hyang attributed the changes in her personality and relationship with her mother to receiving counseling from Dr. Yoo multiple times. She also mentioned that she felt much more comfortable with meeting new people after receiving counseling services at Hankook school. I was surprised to hear her description about herself before receiving counseling services because Hyang appeared to me as an outgoing and active student.

Several teachers at Hankook school also mentioned the importance of having Dr. Yoo as a visiting mental health professional. Ms. Young reported that she witnessed significant improvement in students' conditions after receiving counseling services from Dr. Yoo:

Dr. Yoo is a professional counselor coming to our school. I've seen many students who showed so much improvement after receiving counseling services with her. Because Dr.

Yoo has professional knowledge and personal experiences as North Korean refugee, she could help our students who were struggling with issues deep-inside, better than us [teachers]... I think the best service that we [Hankook school] provide to our students is counseling.

As discussed above, having teachers and visiting professionals who shared similar backgrounds as the students was essential to help students with diverse backgrounds feel comfortable and accepted at school. Ms. Yeon, the vice principal, expressed that the school was trying to hire more teachers who share similar backgrounds as students at Hankook school. Currently, teaching qualification and experience earned in North Korea is not transferrable to the South Korean education system. To reach the goal of hiring more teachers with North Korean refugee backgrounds, policy changes are needed in the area of teacher certification.

### **The Role of Student-Teacher Relationships**

All the student participants highlighted the importance of the close relationships with teachers at Hankook school, which helped them to feel accepted. As I spent time in Hankook school, I often observed that female students and teachers openly showed their affection to each other by hugging or holding hands. I was surprised to witness these student-teacher interactions in the beginning of my stay at Hankook school, because it was not common to observe such intimate interactions between students and teachers in mainstream schools based on my experience working as a teacher in South Korea. Several students who had attended mainstream schools expressed that encountering such close student-teacher interactions at Hankook school was surprising to them. Because M.J., a 19-year-old senior, had negative experiences with teachers while attending mainstream schools, it was surprising for her to witness such different interactions at Hankook school:

Wow! I was astonished to see how friendly teachers were to students. In mainstream schools, it's not possible to have such close relationships with teachers, probably except for only a few students. But here, it was so natural, like holding hands with teachers. But it was very foreign for me to see such things when I first came to this school because I've never done it before... Teachers would ask me even very trivial things like, what I did, if I ate something or things like that.

Several teachers at Hankook school—who had worked in mainstream schools—also mentioned that it is unique to be able to create such close student-teacher relationships at Hankook school.

One way that teachers attempted to build and keep close relationships with students was initiating conversations with each individual student throughout the school day. I often observed teachers having meetings with a group of students or an individual student during lunch time, recess, and/or after school. Through informal meetings, teachers regularly checked in with individual students about their school life, friendships, or family issues. Mr. Kang, the principal of Hankook school, also had regular meetings with individual students. I observed that Mr. Kang had lunch meetings every month with new students who transferred or enrolled in Hankook school. One of the students who joined this lunch meeting explained that Mr. Kang introduced the main goals and expectations towards students as well as checked in with each student to better know about their transition to Hankook school. At the end of the school year, Mr. Kang had lunch meetings every day with individual seniors who were graduating. The close relationships developed through various student-teacher interactions played an important role to support students at Hankook school.

**Feeling accepted and encouraged to continue schooling.** Several students expressed that having close relationships with teachers helped them have a positive schooling experience at

Hankook school. Sue, a 22-year-old senior, shared her perspective about how her relationship with teachers affected her schooling:

I believe that if you have at least one teacher that you can open your mind and rely on, you can move forward even if you have some trouble with your friends. That was the case, at least for me. When I had some hard time, I would approach my teacher and talk through how frustrated I was, then I felt much better. I think Hankook school has a great system of having close relationships with teachers. I feel like most students here have very positive understanding about our teachers. We also recognize and appreciate our teachers for putting so much effort to help us.

Sue expressed that teachers with whom she had a close relationship were a great resource for her to be able to depend on whenever she had a hard time with friendships or other issues. Students at Hankook school often benefited from this kind of close student-teacher relationship. Ms. Won, a teacher at Hankook school, shared her experience of observing positive changes in students' behavior:

Song: Have you ever seen any students who were feeling helplessness, but then later become a hardworking student?

Ms. Won: Yes, of course.

Song: What did you think made such a change within those students?

Ms. Won: I think students received a sense of emotional stability at school. Something like, whatever they do, teachers and the school would understand them and accept them. Students would make trouble, act rebellious, or sometimes act like a child. Once they realize that teachers would accept them as who they were no matter what, then they

began to develop trust with us. After that, they began to try to listen to teachers and paid more attention to school work.

As described in the previous chapter, there were many students who showed behaviors that were often described as challenging at Hankook school. Jung, a 19-year-old senior, was one of the students who had behavioral challenges. Ms. Won shared her experience of observing changes from her student:

[When this student came to our school] in the beginning, I questioned if he [one of her previous students] could continue schooling. He did not have any desire to do anything, and showed hot temper. But as time went by, like one or two years, he became brighter and more positive, and showed some desire to do something.

According to Ms. Won, the feeling of acceptance from teachers helped students with “challenging behaviors” or feeling helplessness to change their attitude toward others and their own life.

Mr. Ju, an alumnus and a teacher at Hankook school, described his appreciation towards teachers when he was a student. Since Mr. Ju relocated to South Korea by himself, he did not have family members or many friends in the beginning of his relocation like many other North Korean SRB. Mr. Ju, recalled how he experienced a feeling of comfort from teachers at Hankook school:

Well, I didn’t have many close friends in South Korea. I had only two places that I often went to, which was school and church. I had friends only in these two places. In school, I had friends and teachers. As you saw, teachers here are really busy, but whenever I came to visit them, they always welcomed and greeted me. They asked me questions if I was doing well and they shared useful information with me. Of course, I sometimes thought

they [teachers] wouldn't understand me, [or] much about my struggles or challenges. But still, the fact that there are people who believe in me and support me really helps me go forward.

Ms. Won, who had been working at Hankook school for 12 years, also shared her belief that building a close relationship helped students, especially unaccompanied North Korean SRB, receive a sense of comfort and stability:

I think it [having close student-teacher relationship] gives students a feeling of stability. South Korean students usually have family, like a mother, who gives and expresses affection and love toward them. But, many of our students don't have family members who could give them something like hugs, compliments, or encourage them. Because they are often alone in South Korea, I think, it is necessary for teachers to give such affection to our students.

Many North Korean SRB who recently relocated to South Korea have few friends or family in South Korea. Therefore, the relationship with teachers is critical for North Korean SRB to be able to have emotional support. This support also relates to students' communal and academic success in a new society.

***Challenges of developing strong student-teacher relationships.*** Even though both teachers and students highlighted the importance of strong student-teacher relationships for successful school life, they identified some challenges for building and continuing the relationship, such as increased workload and responsibilities expected for teachers and teacher-student ratio. Teachers at Hankook school expressed that they viewed themselves as having an increased role in students' personal lives, compared to teachers at mainstream schools. Because



of students' background as North Korean refugees, teachers are often deeply involved in students' lives to help them handle difficult situations. Mr. Song gave an example:

We encounter many situations that our students are in need of money to bring their family members from North Korea or being asked to send money to their family in the North. I feel very sorry when such situations happen to them because we [teachers] can't help them financially every time something like that happens. As you know, we are not that rich. Sometimes, churches that those students belong to provide them financial support. We have allocated some money to be able to help students who were in need of money but cannot find any other help. We tell our students that we are lending money to them with no deadline for paying back.

Teachers collectively worked with the students and other organizations to resolve challenging circumstances in students' lives. Therefore, teachers at Hankook school had to take the role of caregivers or parents to handle situations that students cannot take care of by themselves. Ms. Won reported continuing the responsibility of taking care of students beyond her working hours:

Even during the vacations, we [teachers] make a phone call to each student every week to check with them. During the semester, we put a lot of effort on checking in with each student because it is most important to protect our students not to get involved in a dangerous situation, which they cannot handle without help from parents.

Teachers offered supports to North Korean SRB who had limited access to parent or adult support within and outside of school. Caring for students' lives outside of school therefore became part of the teachers' responsibility.

**Recognizing students' characteristics as strengths.** Rather than focus on perceived deficits or areas in which they were behind academically, several student participants reported

that teachers at Hankook school helped them recognize their strengths. As I described in the previous chapter, M.J., a 19-year-old senior, was able to recognize her strengths because of the feedback from teachers and school leaders at the school. Since M.J. never received any positive feedback from teachers before coming to Hankook school, positive interactions with teachers helped her develop a positive understanding of her identity. During my time at Hankook school, I often observed teachers making comments about students in the teachers' room, such as "he is gemlike" or "she is really a fine student." When students showed improvement in their exams, teachers praised their accomplishments. Students reported that the encouraging cultural environment of the school helped them to set higher expectations for themselves. Mr. Ju, a teacher and alumnus of Hankook school, explained how he was able to challenge himself to go to college:

When I first came to Korea, I wanted to go to college. After facing reality at Hankook school, I realized that it was a goal that was far beyond my ability to reach. I thought it [going to a college] is not a good fit for me. So, I modified my goal to learn skills to get a job after high school instead. I thought I couldn't go to college considering my academic performance at that time. But I still studied hard because I thought it would still be better to try as hard as I could, even if I couldn't go to college. For about a month, I studied what I learned from school at home every day. And I asked lots of questions to teachers in class. After doing it for a month, I felt like I was learning something. I found it to be fun to study and learn. Teachers kept encouraging me that I was doing great and well, which helped me gain a lot of confidence about myself as a student...So, I raised my goal to apply to college.

Mr. Ju expressed that teachers acknowledged his efforts in and outside of the classroom to meet the standards of the South Korea curriculum. Although he knew that his academic performance was far behind students in mainstream schools, he was able to develop confidence through teachers who recognized his hard work. Mr. Ju expressed that he would not have been able to raise his own expectations about himself without support from teachers.

To better understand the supportive aspects of school culture, I asked teachers to describe what they thought students' strengths are and how they came to recognize those strengths in students. Mr. Song, who worked at Hankook school more than a decade, recounted that students at Hankook school demonstrate a tendency to empathize with others:

I think our students have a great degree of empathizing with others, which I believe is their strengths. I saw my students giving quite a big amount of money when they saw poor people. I asked my students why they helped strangers. Then, my students told me that they just couldn't pass by... When they go to volunteer works, they enthusiastically serve people who seem to be in more difficult conditions than themselves. Because of that, they receive a lot of compliments from people at the place they did volunteer work. So, I often let my students know that they have great ability to empathize with others, which is true.

As a part of the school curriculum, students at Hankook school participate in volunteer work at least twice a semester, such as helping patients or elderly people at nursing homes, hospitals, or community service centers. Through years of observing and interacting with students within and outside of Hankook school, Mr. Song learned that students at Hankook school have a great degree of empathy, which he described as a strength of students. Ms. Lee, a school coordinator and a teacher, also recognized students' tendency to empathize with others. Ms. Lee expressed

that students may have developed an ability to genuinely empathize with the hardship of others because of their experiences as refugees:

I think our students are really genuine because they have experienced a lot of difficulties and adversities. Our students are really appreciative with even very small things, and I think it is probably because they went through so many hardships. Once they receive something or help, they always want to pay it back, whether it is a tangible thing or even a word of compliment. I feel that every one of our students is so kindhearted.

Ms. Young, who used to work at a mainstream secondary school, identified that students at Hankook school had higher emotional intelligence than South Korean students:

Students at Hankook school have great ability to understand and empathize with others, especially compared to South Korean kids. A futurologist predicted that those who have higher emotional intelligence will become leaders in the near future. I shared what I read with my students. I think South Korean students are becoming less capable of empathizing with others because of digitization. Compared to South Korean kids, our students are really genuine, warm-hearted, and empathetic. I think our students were able to develop the ability to empathize with others through experiencing a lot of adversities...So, I often highlight to students that they have great emotional intelligence, which is their strength.

Ms. Young shared with me a theory of emotional intelligence written by a futurologist that she recently read. By making connections with emotional intelligence theory in class, Ms. Young helped students view their characteristic of being able to empathize with others as their strengths. In all of these ways, teachers focused on the abilities and unique attributes of students, helping them to see and value these aspects of themselves.

### **Hankook School as a Separate School for North Korean SRB**

Hankook school is an alternative high school founded to exclusively serve North Korean SRB in a separate setting from South Korean students. I was interested in how students and teachers think about the separate educational environment for North Korean SRB and how they envision the school's future, particularly because school leaders often thought about this school as a model for post-unified Korean education. Teachers and students provided their insights about the school's separate learning environment.

**A separate school environment as a “safe” space.** Teachers commonly perceived the separate school setting as a safe space that helps North Korean SRB more easily transition to the South Korean education system and society. Several teachers attributed the need for a separate school setting to the rigid curriculum and hostile culture towards North Korean SRB in mainstream schools in South Korea. Some teachers expressed that a separate school for North Korean SRB is necessary because students are “not ready to be integrated” to mainstream society and schools in South Korea. Ms. Won, who had worked at a mainstream school prior to Hankook school, indicated that some North Korean SRB chose to come to an alternative school because a mainstream school is not an ideal learning environment for those who have diverse ages and educational backgrounds. Unlike mainstream schools where most students have the same age and similar educational backgrounds, there are many students at Hankook school whose ages do not match the typical school age, and in addition, who have diverse educational backgrounds. Therefore, having a different age than their majority peers and interruptions in formal education were not the indicators for singling out students at Hankook school, which is often the case in mainstream schools.

Another teacher, Mr. Choi, mentioned that the climate in mainstream schools does not welcome North Korean SRB as equal members of South Korean society:

Many North Korean adolescents find it difficult to adjust in mainstream schools... There are many students in mainstream schools who are not mature enough to consider [the experiences and perspectives of] students from North Korea. They [South Korean students] would make comments which attack students from North Korea whenever some political conflicts happen between North and South Korea. They treat North Korean students differently by saying “go back to your country [North Korea].” Then, our students get hurt. When there was a bombing by North Korea in *Yeonpyeongdo*<sup>28</sup>, [South Korean] students [in mainstream schools] would say, “Hey, did your uncle bomb?” Then our students would get hurt. Whenever something happens between South and North Korea, people become very hostile towards North Koreans in South Korea. This kind of invisible violence and discrimination really makes our students struggle [to be in mainstream setting].

When political conflicts between North and South Korea arise, public attitudes towards North Korea are often directed towards North Koreans in South Korea. In schools, North Korean SRB become targets of criticism toward the North Korean government’s political decisions, and Mr. Choi believed that an alternative school environment is a safer place for North Korean SRB to avoid unnecessary criticism and discrimination. Mr. Ju explained a similar idea about the needs for a separate school setting for North Korean SRB to protect North Korean SRB who might

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<sup>28</sup> On November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010, the North Korean military fired dozens of artillery shells around the South Korean island, *Yeonpyeongdo*, and the South Korean military fired back to North Korea. Several South and North Korean soldiers were killed or injured. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20101123001048>

have been bullied or discriminated against in mainstream schools because of their different backgrounds.

Ms. Ryu, a teacher who has been working at Hankook school for two years, shared her ideas about why it is necessary for North Korean SRB to be educated separately from their South Korean peers. Ms. Ryu believed that a separate learning environment is inevitable because many North Korean SRB do not have the self-esteem to sustain themselves in South Korean mainstream schools:

I think there are many students who are better to be in a separate school environment, for students who are emotionally very vulnerable and have low self-esteem, or students who see themselves as having nothing to be proud of. I think an alternative school is better for those students because, considering the characteristics of our students, some students may easily lose their temper or make a dangerous decision about themselves when they get hurt outside of our school. But, one of the goals in our school is to help students to better adjust to South Korean society. So, if students seem to be able to succeed in mainstream schools, we recommend they do so.

In the interview, Ms. Ryu indicates that the reason for North Korean SRB being educated in a separate setting is not only because of their different backgrounds, but also a lack of “ability” to successfully adjust in South Korean mainstream schools and society. I noticed that the underlying assumption of inclusion in mainstream schools is dependent on students’ ability to successfully adjust in South Korean mainstream schools.

Overall, the teachers I interviewed described the purpose of a separate schooling environment as: 1) providing a bridge for students—who have low self-esteem resulting in emotional stress or were experiencing mental health conditions—to gain stability in South

Korean society, 2) helping students to catch up to the academic expectations of the curriculum in mainstream schools, and 3) protecting students who experience bullying or other mistreatment in mainstream schools due to hostility towards North Korea. Teachers appeared to view North Korean SRB attending a separate school as inevitable. Yet, they did not express consideration for how mainstream school environments could be altered (e.g., efforts to prevent bullying) to avoid or reduce the need for a separate school environment. Within the current discourse, schools such as Hankook school appear to serve as an alternative to changing structures and practices that will meet the diverse educational needs of North Korean SRB in mainstream schools.

Another interview question that I asked teachers was, “How do you envision the future of this school, in 10, 20, or 30 years?” In response to this question, teachers, except for Mr. Ju, explained that they hoped Hankook school would “become the center of education for unified Korea” (Mr. Song), “have better school facilities with playgrounds” (Mr. Choi), and “involve more teachers or school staff members from North Korea” (Ms. Won). As opposed to most teachers who envisioned Hankook school’s external and internal development in the future, Mr. Ju expressed a different hope:

I hope that Hankook school won’t exist anymore soon. Meaning, I hope that North Koreans in South Korea do not face any difficulties living here, even without any special programs. I think it is necessary to have special schools because there are students like gifted children or geniuses who need special instruction. Also, there are children who are the opposite [of gifted children], so it is necessary to have special schools for them.

However, it is not ideal to have a special school for people who are from a certain region, like North Korea. The fact that there are schools for North Koreans means that this society is very exclusive to certain people [who are from different backgrounds]. North



Koreans in South Korea also need to work hard to get adjusted to South Korean society.

If we really want to be ready for unification of Korea, it is better [for North Korean SRB] to be with South Korean students. There will be some people who wouldn't like my idea though.

Mr. Ju envisioned that North Korean SRB should not be excluded from mainstream society because of their regional backgrounds. The existence of special schools for North Korean SRB symbolized how exclusionary South Korean society is towards those with different backgrounds. Mr. Ju also highlighted the importance of inclusion of North Korean SRB and South Korean students to better prepare for Korea's unification. However, he continued to believe it would be necessary to have special schools for students with different abilities, even in a more culturally and politically unified society.

**Concerns about a separate school environment.** Both teachers and students identified that North Korean SRB would not be given a chance to learn the culture of their South Korean peers, which will eventually become challenging for students after graduating from Hankook school. In addition, participants expressed that a separate learning environment hinders North Korean SRB from experiencing the reality of competitive South Korean school culture and society. Sue, a 22-year-old senior, shared her concern about Hankook school's separate learning environment removing North Korean SRB from the opportunity to learn with South Korean students. Since Sue was a senior and preparing for her college application when we had interviews, she showed her concern about the changes that she might face after graduating from high school. Sue thought that North Korean SRB would eventually face more difficulty in college when they have to socialize with South Korean students.

Mr. Ju, an alumnus and a teacher at Hankook school, shared his own experience of being educated in a separate school. He identified that North Korean SRB in separate school environments lack opportunities to learn the South Korean culture of their peers, an important part for one's socialization:

The fact that we are not mingling with South Korean kids means that we cannot learn peer culture or language, even though we are living and have to live in South Korea. Especially teen culture is very unique and special. If we did not experience and learn such unique culture, we cannot have common ground of understanding the same culture with South Korean students in college. This will eventually create cultural separation between us and South Korean students...Separated from South Korean students, we don't understand slang or popular terms among peers in our age. I didn't know popular teen culture in South Korea...Another drawback [of being separated from South Korean students] is that we don't get to see how hard South Korean students study and work in this competitive South Korean society.

Mr. Ju pointed out the importance for North Korean SRB to be immersed in the same adolescent culture with other South Korean peers. Through sharing the same culture with South Korean students, North Korean SRB can better understand cultural references or contemporary culture, which is essential to be able to create relationships with peers after high school. Yet, North Korean SRB at an alternative school—separated from South Korean peers—are less likely to experience or develop relationships with their peers who have different backgrounds.

While participants identified the benefits of North Korean SRB attending schools with South Korean students, they did not speak of the benefits of inclusion as a two-way street (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011). No teachers and students that I

interviewed identified benefits that South Korean students would receive from including North Korean SRB in mainstream schools. Teachers and students at Hankook school considered students' academic and social competency as a prerequisite of inclusion for North Korean SRB in mainstream schools. Therefore, North Korean SRB are considered as benefitting from being educated in a separate school that adjusts to their needs, while South Korean students are not deemed to be missing out on benefits by attending schools separate from North Korean SRB.

In Hankook school, teachers provided instructions based on a scaffolded curriculum, tailored to students' different educational backgrounds, which many students expressed as a benefit of learning at Hankook school. However, one teacher showed her concern about students at Hankook school beginning to fall behind South Korean students because of the exclusive learning environment separate from competitive South Korean school culture. Ms. Lee expressed, "I think we [teachers at Hankook school] need to push our students to upgrade them. Students are stagnated here, there is no improvement. I feel sorry for them." While South Korean students have been exposed to competitive school culture since a young age, Ms. Lee thought that North Korean SRB were being "stagnated" in Hankook school because students are not exposed to how competitive South Korean society is.

In the U.S., one of the problems of separate school placement for students with disabilities is teachers' low expectations towards students (Connor & Ferri, 2007). The institutional practice of separating students identified as having a disability reinforces teachers to hold low expectation towards students served in a separate learning environment. The intention to provide scaffolded curricula to students at Hankook school is to reflect students' different educational backgrounds. However, Ms. Lee pointed out the possibility that teachers in Hankook school unintentionally but clearly set up low expectations towards North Korean SRB and may

not challenge students enough to reach their potential because of the nature of separation in the school setting.

### **The Christian Mission School**

Hankook school was founded by Christian churches, organizations, and individual donors to support North Korean adolescents who relocated to South Korea. Therefore, Christian values are important aspects in the development of the school's educational philosophy and curriculum. One of the main educational philosophies of the school stated on the school's website refers to "respecting one's dignity and identity as children of God." During my time at Hankook school, I observed and participated in several school activities that included Christian practices and ideas. For example, all the students and teachers were mandated to participate in a weekly worship service at the school. In terms of school curriculum, all students had to take a subject called "Ethics and religious studies" for at least two years, taught by Mr. Choi, a teacher who was also a pastor. The school's leader, Mr. Kang, recounted that the enrollment of the school was not restricted to students who identified as Christian, however many students converted to Christianity while they attended Hankook school.

There were several reasons why students converted to Christianity over time. First, many North Korean SRB were introduced to Christianity through their refugee journey or after they relocated to South Korea because many Christian organizations have been helping North Korean refugees in China and other neighboring countries to relocate to South Korea (Lee, 2012). Through this missionary work, many North Korean refugees were introduced to Christianity. One of the student participants, Sue, who now identified herself as Christian, shared her experience of being introduced to Christianity during her refugee journey in Vietnam and Cambodia after leaving China:

[When I left China] I took a route via Vietnam and Cambodia that was supported and led by [South Korean] church organization. At that time, I would get up at like five in the morning and do morning prayer meeting and worship services. When I was in China, Korean tourists brought me to a church there also. So, I went to church and I was like, “What is it? This is something called church.” I had no idea [about Christianity] at that time. But, in Cambodia, I had to live there for almost six months. I was reading the bible almost every day, then I began to have curiosity to know about it.

Sue remained engaged in the Christian community since she was first introduced to Christianity. Since there are many Christian organizations that unofficially work to rescue North Korean refugees in China and neighboring countries, several other students also expressed that they were introduced to Christianity during their refugee journey or after relocation. In South Korea, many churches conduct missionary work targeting North Koreans to help them transition into South Korean society with an aim of converting them to Christianity (Chung, 2016). To do so, Christian organizations provide tangible and intangible benefits to North Koreans, which attracts North Korean relocators to come to churches in South Korea. One of the student participants, Mi, shared with me that she has been attending a local church that had a strong missionary focus of helping North Korean young adults in South Korea. The church provided the church members from North Korea with a stipend if they do not miss coming to the church on Sundays. Even though Mi expressed that she does not have any faith in Christianity, she has been attending the church for years because of the stipend.

Secondly, students became exposed to Christian culture, practices, and ideologies through various school activities, such as weekly worships or religious studies class. When there were school assemblies or school-wide events, I often observed that teachers or school leaders

opened or closed the event by praying. The school leader, Mr. Kang, frequently emphasized how miraculous it is for students to be able to safely arrive in South Korea, despite experiencing a series of life-and-death situations during their refugee journey. He highlighted God's plan towards the students, which led them to safely move to South Korea. Teachers also reflected Christian philosophies in their teaching or mentoring students. Ms. Won expressed that she often shared the school's Christian philosophy with her students during class-wide morning and afternoon assemblies:

Song: How do you use the class-wide morning and afternoon assemblies?

Ms. Won: When I am not teaching the class subject?

Song: Yes.

Ms. Won: I often talk about our summons [given by God] because our school is a Christian mission school. I highlight to my students that "You guys will take very important roles in the unified Korean society. To be prepared for that, you will have to work hard, because South Korean people tend to get a sense of North Korean society through you. If you give them [South Koreans] positive impression, they will also look forward to Korea's unification." I highlight this [mission] a lot to my students.

It is common to have class-wide daily assemblies in the morning and after a school day in South Korean schools. Homeroom teachers often use this time to share the housekeeping agenda or for disciplining or mentoring students. By highlighting God's plan and summons for North Korean SRB, Ms. Won often encouraged students to be able to find the meaning of their life in a new society.

Another reason many students converted to Christianity is the strong support system between Hankook school and churches or Christian organizations supporting the school. Several

Christian churches or organizations provided significant financial support to Hankook school, such as running a dormitory for Hankook school students. Because of that, Hankook school was able to provide free housing to any unaccompanied North Korean SRB or those living far from the school. In addition to free accommodations and food, students also received supports from church members. For example, church members volunteered to be tutors to help students living in the dormitory with their school work. Some students received free lessons learning a musical instrument from church members, such as playing the guitar or piano. While interacting with volunteers who were also church members, students were gradually introduced to Christianity and often joined the supporting churches.

Hyang shared with me how she converted to Christianity three years ago. Since Hyang transferred to Hankook school, she has been surrounded by people who were related to the school and dormitory. This environment influenced her to become interested in Christianity:

Song: Do teachers at your school ask you to go to church?

Hyang: Not really. They don't say it much. If I want to, I can go to church.

Song: How did you become to have faith?

Hyang: People around me are all Christian. Especially, our school is a mission school, people working at my dormitory are all Christian, and volunteer tutors and teachers are also all Christian.

Song: Did they tell you to go to church or have faith?

Hyang: Yes, they tried to convince me to have faith. I was very uncomfortable in the beginning. But then, as I kept listening to their stories of how they had experienced God, I began to think that this may not be coincidence. I didn't think that they believed in God

because they were foolish or had nothing to do with their time. And then, I became curious to know more about that religion and began to have some faith.

Hyang told me that there was not much pressure towards students to convert to Christianity at the school. However, Hyang became interested in Christianity while interacting with people around her, such as volunteer-tutors and resident advisors in her dormitory.

**Christianity as agency.** There were many students who identified themselves as Christian at Hankook school. Four out of six student participants in this study identified themselves as Christian. The school principal, Mr. Kang, explained that students from North Korea are often atheist because of the regime's strict law prohibiting the freedom of religion. However, by the time students graduate from Hankook school, about 70 to 80 percent of the student population converts to Christianity or at least joins church communities. In order to better understand how students respond to the school's Christian approaches in education, I had conversations with several students and teachers at Hankook school. A few students expressed that they were able to develop a positive understanding about their identity and self-esteem through Christian faith. Sue, a 22-year-old senior, expressed that she was able to gain a better understanding about her identity after she developed a faith in Christianity which taught her that everyone is equal in front of God:

Song: Do you think that your perspective about yourself and your life has been changed since you developed faith in God?

Sue: I think so. I became less obsessed about material things. Because of my mom, I used to have this feeling that I had to become the best, even though I was not. I felt like I was always looking for something that is meaningless, which made me unsatisfied with myself. Since I joined my church and listened to sermons and participated in worships, I



felt that I gained my self-confidence. I think having the [Christian] faith is important. We are all equally created creatures in front of Jesus and God. Therefore, I began to understand that I was not strange or wrong. I'm just different from other people. I was able to manage my anger better also. When my friends at school made fun of me, I felt resentful towards them after school. But, since I believed in God, I began to think that they may make fun of me because they didn't know me well.

Mr. Ju, a teacher and an alumnus of Hankook school, also shared a similar experience of how Christianity helped him develop a positive understanding about himself as a North Korean:

[I thought to myself] even though I cannot reach the standard that people created to evaluate each other, would I fall short of the standard in front of God? This kind of idea helped me maintain and elevate my self-esteem and sort of liberated me [from such oppressive ideas].

Other student participants who identified themselves as Christian also expressed that they benefitted from having faith in Christianity in many different ways, such as “being able to have a stronger mindset to face challenges” (Jung) and “learning life management skills” (Hyang). M.J., who converted to Christianity only a few months before the interview, told me that she strongly believed that it was “God’s plan” that she was able to transfer to Hankook school and develop positive relationships with teachers.

Students, as well as the teacher, Mr. Ju, expressed that they benefited from the school’s educational approaches founded on Christian ideology. They believed that the Christian philosophy enabled teachers to be able to provide strong support for students. In other words, students felt that teachers trusted them because of the Christian philosophy that guided the teachers’ approach to teaching them. Jung, a 19-year-old senior who went to a few different

alternative schools serving North Korean SRB before transferring to Hankook school shared his opinion about his experience with teachers. “I didn’t really feel that I was receiving love or care from teachers when I was attending \*\* school [name omitted]. Maybe it was because teachers there didn’t belong to a church community or something, I guess.” Jung made a connection that the teachers’ strong support for students at Hankook school was because of the Christian belief that school teachers applied in their teaching. Mr. Ju also recalled his time at Hankook school when he was a student as, “the teachers demonstrated the Christian mindset through their teaching.”

I was curious to know how other non-Christian students described the school’s approach using Christian ideology. Moon, a 22-year-old freshman, who identified himself as non-Christian, described his feeling about attending a mission school and how he understood the school’s Christian approach in educating students:

Song: Students have to participate in the worship services and the religious studies class, right? How do you feel about it?

Moon: I just participate in the worship services, listening to the talk from the pastor.

Song: But doesn’t it bother you to participate in those activities even though you do not believe in Christianity?

Moon: No. Even though I don’t believe in [Christianity], it’s not like I hate it or something...Before I came to Hankook school, I had never thought that this kind of school could exist in this society. As you know, South Korea is a capitalist society. In this capitalist society, it is amazing that this kind of space could exist. I think in a capitalist society, people only think about themselves. But here, it is mostly about other people. I felt surprised to know this school and the teachers are all very nice and supportive of us.

Even though Moon did not identify himself as Christian, he understood the school's approach founded on Christian ideology as "sharing and serving others." Moon expressed that he was impressed by the way teachers demonstrated serving students in a capitalist society where people are focused on accumulating individual wealth.

Students viewed the school's Christianity philosophy favorably because they attributed teachers' dedication to teaching North Korean SRB to the teachers' Christian philosophy. This was despite the fact that the current reputation of Christianity is negative in South Korea. Many churches in South Korea have been criticized for following a capitalist system and ideology to expand the size of the churches and the number of church members (Kim, 2014). Several well-known leaders of Protestant churches openly preach that people can gain material wealth by attending church and following Christianity. Public awareness of such preaching has led people to harshly criticize the growth of Christianity (Chang, 2018). Yet, the ways that teachers advocated for Christian ideals at Hankook school was viewed positively by students, as an indicator of the commitment of teachers and school leaders to their education.

**Alternative school run by a charity model.** As mentioned earlier, Hankook school was not eligible to receive educational funding from the Ministry of Education because of the alternative school setting. According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2017), schools must adopt at least 50 percent of the national curriculum into their school curriculum in order to receive funding from the Ministry of Education, regardless of their public or private setting (ROK, 2017b). Considering the purpose of alternative schools—many alternative schools were founded to serve students without following the national curriculum—most alternative schools are not eligible to receive funding from the government. As a result, Hankook school had to rely on donations and volunteer supports from individual and organizational donors to manage

the school. Both the principal and vice principal have been working hard to raise outside funding for the school. When invited to lectures as guest speakers, both school leaders introduced their experience of working with North Korean SRB at Hankook school, which helped raise awareness about North Korean SRB in South Korean society. As the school received more public attention over time, the school began to receive more financial and volunteer support from both Christian and non-Christian organizations and individual donors.

Even though Hankook school received financial support from many different sources, securing financial sustainability is always the concern because of the on-going lack of funding from the Ministry of Education. Hankook school, therefore, has organized an annual fund-raising event, which is the largest school event of the year. Mr. Song explained the history of the school's fund-raising event:

The biggest event that we do for raising funds is the fund-raising event...The first principal of the school decided to have this event because we were in need of money at that time. The concept of the fund-raising event at that time was inviting well-known vocalists or celebrities to our fund-raising event so that we can raise funds by selling tickets for like 40,000 or 50,000 won. They [vocalists and celebrities] volunteered at the event for us. We organized our first two fund-raising events with this concept. But, the audience expressed that they wanted to hear stories about our students from North Korea. They wanted to see our students performing at the event. Thus, we included student performances in the event, while reducing the performance by the celebrities. At this event, many people in the audience decided to donate for our students and our school. During my second visit to Hankook school, I was able to observe and participate in the school's fund-raising event. As Mr. Song described, students participated by performing in a musical,

Taekwondo, or a choir. In order to prepare, students practiced for weeks before the event, almost every day after school. During the week of the fund-raising event, students and teachers spent all day on the rehearsals. Many students expressed that they liked participating in the fund-raising event because not many students were given a chance to perform in front of a large audience. And yet, some of the students showed their concern for not being able to spend enough time continuing their school work when they prepare for the fund-raising event. Because of the school's alternative setting and financial situation—not receiving education funding from the South Korean government—teachers and students had to share the responsibility of ensuring the school's financial sustainability through preparing for the fund-raising event.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed results of how students and teachers described the educational approaches and practices at Hankook school. I shared data from interviews with students, school leaders, and students. I also relied on my fieldnotes, information from the school's website, and textbooks that the school teachers published. The results of the data indicate that Hankook school: 1) created and provided students with a unique curriculum that reflected students' diverse educational and cultural backgrounds; 2) created new textbooks and course topics; and, 3) provided individualized educational supports. I found that the role of the student-teacher relationship was crucial for students' academic success, communal participation, and emotional stability. Students and teachers expressed that teachers and students both benefit from creating and continuing close relationships with each other.

As an alternative high school serving North Korean SRB in South Korea, Hankook school had several unique aspects in terms of its school setting. First, North Korean SRB at Hankook school were educated separately from South Korean peers. Teachers and students both

expressed pros and cons of being educated in a separate learning environment. For example, Hankook school served the role of an incubating space for North Korean SRB who were new to the South Korean education system, culture, and society. At the same time, the separate learning environment reduced the opportunities for North Korean SRB to immerse themselves in the culture of their South Korean peers or to observe aspects of South Korean society. There were mixed opinions about whether students were able to achieve more or less as a result of being in a segregated space. Finally, as a Christian mission school, Hankook school had several educational approaches and practices which influenced students to be exposed to a Christian philosophy. Students who identified as Christian used their faith as an agency for them to develop a firm understanding about their identity. In the next and final chapter, I discuss the summary of my research findings and the implications of these results for educational settings outside of Hankook school. I also discuss limitations and future directions of my research.

## **Chapter Seven:**

### **Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the key findings and implications of this study. I begin by reviewing the process of this study, including the methodology, data collection and research participants. I then discuss key findings of this study. I organize these findings according to each of the three research questions I sought to answer. I then provide an analysis of the key findings. In this section, I include implications for researchers, educators, and practitioners who are serving refugee, asylum seeking, or immigrant students that are often perceived as being “at risk” for struggling in school and/or for being identified as having a disability. I conclude the chapter by addressing the limitations of this study, suggesting directions for future research, and sharing a final thought about the significance of the study.

When I worked as an elementary teacher in South Korea, there were several students from North Korea attending the school. Teachers at the school often described these students as behaviorally “challenging” or academically “slow” or “behind.” The tendency of teachers to interpret refugee students’ behavioral or academic characteristics from a deficit perspective is not uncommon, even outside of South Korea. In the U.S., an increasing number of refugee, asylum seeking, immigrant students or English language learners are identified as having disabilities and educated outside of general education classrooms (Gabel et al., 2009; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). Similarly, many North Korean students with refugee backgrounds (SRB) who attend mainstream schools in South Korea are often perceived as having learning delays or emotional and behavioral issues (Lee, 2015). Faced with the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and school system in South Korea, many North Korean SRB drop out of mainstream

schools or leave for alternative schools exclusively serving North Korean SRB (KEDI, 2016; Schwartzman, 2009).

After two trips to South Korea to conduct fieldwork—including 15 interviews, participant observations, and ongoing communication with teachers and students at Hankook school—I began to understand that one of the most challenging issues that North Korean SRB faced is their stigmatized identity in South Korean society. North Korean SRB expressed that the physical, emotional, and cultural/linguistic differences that they brought into mainstream schools in South Korea were often misinterpreted as deviant, or as representing a deficit in their knowledge and ability. Through these negative experiences, North Korean SRB began to develop identities forged at the intersection of refugee background and disability in South Korean schools and society at large.

Qualitative research methods allowed me to focus on the voices of students and teachers as a means to understand how the identities of refugee background and disability intersected to shape the experiences of North Korean SRB. Through interviews, I was able to gain an understanding of the challenges and struggles that students and their teachers experienced. Participant observation was also a critical method of data collection. For about four months in the summer and winter of 2017—the equivalent of one academic semester in South Korea—I was able to become involved in school events and was welcomed by teachers, students, and staff members at the school, not only as a researcher but also as a colleague, mentor, teacher, and friend. Without the relationships that were built during this fieldwork, it would not have been possible to gain access to the data that I analyzed in the previous chapters.



## Key Findings

Using grounded theory, I was able to explore and develop new theories about intersectional experiences of North Korean SRB. I began this study with three research questions:

1. How do North Korean SRB describe their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee backgrounds and relocation to South Korean society?
2. How is (dis)ability constructed and experienced by North Korean SRB in South Korean schools?
3. How do students, teachers, and school leaders who attend or work for an alternative school for North Korean SRB in South Korea describe the philosophical approaches and practices used in the school?

Below, I discuss key findings of each research question. I then discuss implications of my dissertation study for educational contexts beyond South Korean alternative schools.

### **Question 1: How do North Korean SRB describe their characteristics, identity, and experiences related to their refugee backgrounds and relocation to South Korean society?**

In Chapter Four, I discussed experiences of North Korean SRB before, during, and after their refugee journey. North Korean SRB experienced that their identity and characteristics as North Koreans were interpreted or valued differently depending on the society to which they belonged. During their refugee journey and upon relocating to South Korea, many North Korean SRB felt the need to hide their North Korean refugee identity because they often experienced disadvantages when disclosing their identity. During their refugee journey, North Korean SRB also hid their identity as North Korean refugees because of the legal threat of being deported back to their home country. In South Korea, North Korean SRB experienced discrimination

against their stigmatized identity as North Korean SRB. Students' characteristics as North Korean SRB (e.g., North Korean accent, body figure, clothing, and hair style) became an indicator of social, cultural, and linguistic minority status, which separated them from their South Korean peers. Therefore, many North Korean SRB chose to adopt the contemporary style or culture of South Korean young adults or teenagers to avoid the disadvantages resulting from disclosing their identity (as North Korean) in South Korean schools and society.

North Korean SRB also experienced changing cultural norms and values as they moved from one society to another. Based on the values and norms constructed within each particular society, North Korean SRB experienced various degrees of discrimination. For example, one student who did not have characteristics typically associated with a North Korean refugee, such as being thin, short, and speaking with a North Korean accent, reported that she faced little discrimination against her identity as a North Korean SRB. Meanwhile, other students expressed having experienced discrimination in South Korea because they exhibited these identity markers. While experiencing challenges associated with their stigmatized identities in South Korea, several students demonstrated agency in how they responded to these challenges as North Korean SRB. For example, one student confronted stigmas associated with her North Korean refugee identity by actively disclosing her identity, which did not fit stereotypical characteristics of North Koreans. Passing as South Korean was important for many students because they could avoid the disadvantages coming from disclosing their North Korean identity. By actively adopting contemporary South Korean teen culture and styles, North Korean SRB demonstrated agency in how they adapted. Yet the fact that they felt so compelled to 'pass' as South Koreans was also indicative of how they internalized the oppression they faced due to their minoritized identity.

**Question 2: How is (dis)ability constructed and experienced by North Korean SRB in South Korean schools?**

To examine the construction of (dis)ability for North Korean SRB in South Korean schools, I first examined how students and teachers understand and define disability. Most students expressed that disability is physical or psychological impairments that hinder one's independent or successful living. Students' understanding about disability reflected a medical model of disability in that they viewed disability as a hinderance to one's "normal" or independent living. While considering physical impairment as a permanent disability, many students described psychological disorders that they or their North Korean peers had experienced as temporary conditions which could happen as the result of certain life experiences. Teachers' understandings about disability were indicative of both social and medical models of disability. Several teachers, for instance, reported that a biased perspective towards minority groups, such as North Korean SRB in South Korean schools, is disabling towards members of that group. These same teachers expressed that a separate learning environment was necessary for North Korean SRB who were experiencing mental health conditions, as a bridge for students to gain stability in South Korean society. Although teachers indicated that there were several students with psychological disorders, none of the student participants viewed themselves or their peers at Hankook school as having a disability.

North Korean SRB experienced physical impairments or symptoms of psychological disorders because of the conditions that they faced as refugees, such as forced labor, trafficking, detention, malnutrition, and/or starvation. However, students and teachers did not see these conditions as evidence of disabilities. Instead, they said that these characteristics were a temporary reaction to adverse environments, a perspective indicative of a social model of

understanding (dis)ability. Students and teachers expressed the importance of receiving support from physical or mental health professionals who understood the conditions that many North Korean refugees faced. However, the number of mental health professionals who share similar backgrounds as North Korean SRB is extremely limited in South Korea.

Students expressed experiencing a shifting academic identity before and after they had experience as a refugee. A major reason for their shift in academic identity was because of the different expectation about the role of students in each society. North Korean SRB who were accustomed to the school culture and system in North Korea found it difficult to take on a different student role in order to meet the expectation for students in South Korean schools. In North Korean schools, students were encouraged to act as obedient recipients of knowledge. These students, however, were often viewed as lacking independence or autonomy in South Korean schools. Another reason for experiencing a shifting academic identity was related to a lack of educational support provided to North Korean SRB in South Korean schools. Despite gaps in their formal education, several North Korean SRB expressed that they did not receive necessary educational support when attending mainstream schools in South Korea, which left them academically behind their South Korean peers. As a result, many North Korean SRB began to internalize a negative identity about themselves as learners.

**Question 3: How do students, teachers, and school leaders describe philosophical approaches and practices used in Hankook school?**

Teachers at Hankook school provided culturally relevant curricula and individualized educational supports that reflected students' diverse educational backgrounds. Teachers developed textbooks specifically for North Korean SRB and provided individual teaching supports as well as extra-curricular activities that were relevant to the specific interests and needs

of students. Students and teachers also described the importance of having teachers and school professionals who shared similar backgrounds as North Korean SRB. Hankook school hired two teachers and one mental health professional (professional counselor) who were from North Korea and had refugee experience themselves. Having teachers and a mental health professional who shared similar backgrounds as students was particularly helpful because students felt more comfortable sharing their challenges and struggles with these teachers and the counselor. For example, Ms. Lee, a former middle school teacher in North Korea, used an approach to working with students which was influenced by her experiencing the structures and culture of both North and South Korean schools. She felt she understood students' struggles as new members of the South Korean school culture and system, as well as the challenges faced by female North Korean SRB (e.g., being the target of human trafficking, giving birth to a child during their refugee journey). With her experiences as a refugee as well as a former teacher in North Korea, Ms. Lee felt her connections with several students at Hankook school were enhanced. In addition, both teachers and students reported that close student-teacher relationships played a key role in having a successful schooling experience. Students developed self-esteem and competency as learners through positive interactions with teachers. Several students reported that they were experiencing positive interactions with teachers, which helped them to build a positive understanding about their identity as a student in South Korea.

Another unique educational approach that teachers and school leaders at Hankook school demonstrated was making connections between students' refugee backgrounds and the necessary traits that future leaders are required to have in a post-unified Korean society. Teachers and school leaders deliberately highlighted students' backgrounds as North Korean refugees during instruction and one-on-one mentoring. For example, several teachers acknowledged how

students' lived experiences in several countries through their refugee journey were unique and valuable qualities to have in a globalized world. Teachers and school leaders at Hankook school also encouraged students to view themselves as future leaders in a post-unified Korean society who understand the cultural and social systems of both North and South Korea. And yet, the underlying message of recognizing North Korean SRB as future leaders in a post-unified Korea was indicative of colonial rhetoric; teachers and school leaders viewed students as becoming messengers to deliver South Korea's "advanced" education, cultural and political system to the North.

Hankook school is an alternative high school serving North Korean SRB separately from their South Korean peers. Students and teachers expressed both the necessity and drawbacks of having a separate school apart from their South Korean peers. Teachers and students viewed the separate learning environment as a safe space to protect North Korean SRB who may face bullying or discrimination in mainstream South Korean schools. Yet this separate school space also hindered many North Korean SRB as well as South Korean students from getting to know each other's culture, thereby creating a barrier for North Korean SRB to transition into South Korean society. As a Christian mission school, Hankook school also embedded a Christian philosophy in developing the school curriculum and teaching practices. Students made connections between Christian philosophy and teachers' devotion to teaching, such as having faith in students who might be otherwise dismissed in mainstream schools because of exhibiting challenging behaviors or being behind academically.

### **Implications for Researchers, Educators, and Practitioners**

In drawing upon Disability Studies to shape this study, I did not intend to equate disability and refugee identity. Rather, I wanted to analyze how the abilities of North Korean

SRB are interpreted within their social context, such that they may be deemed disabled in their relocated society. Currently, a growing number of cultural and linguistic minority students in the U.S. are disproportionately identified as eligible for special education services and taught in restrictive, or separate environments (Blanchett, 2006; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Similarly, many students with refugee backgrounds who come to the U.S. are determined to have disability labels (e.g., Learning Disabilities, Emotionally and Behaviorally Disturbed) which are highly subjective, and often nonexistent labels in many of the students' home countries (WHO & WB, 2011). Below, I point out some implications of my study for educators, school administrators, and researchers who are serving students with identities that are both minoritized and intersected with disability status.

**Social construction and embodiment at the intersection of (dis)ability and refugee identity.** A central implication of this study is understanding how (dis)ability is socially constructed for North Korean SRB in South Korea. One central purpose with which I framed this study was to understand how North Korean students' refugee identity intersects with (dis)ability. Despite the fact that North Korean SRB might not be formally recognized as disabled in South Korea (i.e., provided special education), school-age refugees and asylum-seekers are frequently characterized as experiencing physical, emotional, or psychological disabilities or disorders (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, learning disabilities, and/or behavioral and emotional disorders) because of the adversity that they face during their refugee journey (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004). Researchers in the field of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) argue that refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants are likely to embody disabilities as a result of experiencing dangerous refugee journeys and a lack of adequate resources (Connell, 2011; Erevelles, 2011).

The findings of this study both reinforce and extend understandings from these previous studies about embodied aspects of disability related to students' refugee experiences. Students at Hankook school expressed that they experienced adverse physical or psychological conditions because of their refugee journey. These experiences illustrate the necessity of providing supports for students' mental and physical health and especially access to mental health professionals who understand students' North Korean refugee identity and refugee experiences, which is currently extremely limited in South Korea. Yet, the findings of this study also build on previous research by demonstrating how disability can become embodied, not only through refugee experiences, but also through the effects of living with a stigmatized identity, social structures, policies, and structures of education in a new society.

Upon arrival in South Korea, North Korean SRB are often forced to embody several minoritized identities (e.g., cultural, linguistic, economic). Some students experienced drastic changes in their family's socioeconomic status<sup>29</sup> and lost cultural capital after relocating to South Korea, which, they reported, led them to depression and a lack of self-esteem. Students in this study also reported experiencing bullying by peers, and poor treatment by teachers when attending South Korean mainstream schools because of their cultural and linguistic differences. These experiences as North Korean SRB in mainstream schools eventually led many students to internalize a negative understanding of themselves and to experience symptoms of mental health problems (e.g., eating disorders, suicide attempts, panic disorders, or issues with anger management). The stigma and economic circumstances that students in this study experienced illustrate how they began to be associated with elements of disability, only after coming to South Korea. The phenomenon of students embodying elements of disability after relocating to South

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<sup>29</sup> Economically, most North Korean SRB and their families in South Korea have a comparably lower socioeconomic status and show a much higher unemployment rate than South Koreans (KWMA, 2016; Yoo, 2008).



Korea resembles what Connell (2011) refers to as the “social embodiment” of disability, in which the social dynamics (i.e., material and sociocultural conditions) of one’s context affect their bodies. In other words, even traditional sociocultural concepts, such as stigma, are not purely sociocultural as they also become embodied aspects of disability in the form of affecting a student’s mental and physical health.

In addition to wanting to exam disability in an embodied sense, I also used the term (dis)ability in this study to foreground socially constructed aspects of (dis)ability. I wanted to understand how *ability* was constructed within the schooling experiences of North Korean SRB. More specifically, I was interested in understanding how North Korean SRB were treated and perceived in relation to the abilities valued at Hankook school, other schools which students previously attended, and the broader sociocultural context. The findings of this study illustrate the complexity of understanding the construction of (dis)ability for North Korean SRB. In some aspects, Hankook school resembled aspects of a special education placement. For example, Hankook school relied on charity to maintain the school’s finances, reflecting a charity model that is commonly used in relation to disabled individuals. In a charity model, disabled individuals are perceived as unproductive members of society—even though a lack of adequate resources hinder their full contribution to society—which leads them to become the recipients of a form of charity (Wendell, 2010). In South Korea, North Korean SRB and their parents face similar treatment and social exclusion; many North Korean relocators are unemployed or underemployed and live with a social security stipend (Yoo, 2008). The social and economic exclusion of North Korean relocators in South Korean society makes them rely on charity offered by Christian organizations or churches, while the South Korean government is less obligated to provide resources for North Korean relocators. The fact that Hankook school is not

eligible to receive funding from the Ministry of Education makes them dependent on charity to maintain their school and provide education to North Korean SRB.

In addition to positing North Korean SRB as recipients of charity to continue their education—separate from their South Korean peers—the knowledge and experiences that North Korean SRB bring to South Korean schools are often perceived as lacking a certain competency. For example, several teachers at Hankook school indicated that information that is being taught in North Korean schools is inaccurate based on the South Korean curriculum. Therefore, their task is to teach students to unlearn and relearn material. Because of the differences in expectations for a student's role in both North and South Korean schools, North Korean SRB are expected to change the way they participate in their education in order to demonstrate their competency as a learner in South Korean schools. In other words, the knowledge and skills North Korean SRB brought to South Korean schools were perceived as lacking, or deficient, in comparison to their native South Korean peers.

Yet, in other aspects, educational practices depart from approaches that emphasize remediation of skills towards normative expectations of ability. I observed, for instance, that teachers and students collaboratively created a school culture that decentered the qualities that are often considered normative markers of ability in South Korea. Students who may have been diagnosed or perceived as having psychological disorders, emotional or behavioral issues, or learning disabilities in mainstream schools were not viewed in terms of these disability labels at Hankook school. Instead, teachers supported students through a needs-based and strengths-based approach. For example, teachers at Hankook school deliberately highlighted attributes that students developed, likely in part due to their refugee experiences (e.g., resilience, emotional intelligence, creativity, or steadiness). Students shared how they learned to effectively respond to

adversity throughout their journey. Students and teachers reported that these same qualities were not often valued or recognized in a traditional school setting where the focus is more on students' academic performance. Both teachers and students at Hankook school recognized that resilience and emotional intelligence are valuable for understanding one's identity and persevering in life. The perspectives of students and teachers in this study are consistent with previous research findings that many school-age refugees and asylum-seekers develop resilience and coping skills during their journey to resettlement (Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012). More research is needed to examine how characteristics of resilience can be recognized, valued and nurtured in classrooms.

Another example of how (dis)ability was constructed differently in Hankook school comes from students' reflections of being labeled a "multicultural student" in mainstream South Korean school settings. The label of "multicultural student" made Mi, a 21-year-old senior, feel like an outsider in South Korean society. Categorizing students as "multicultural" in mainstream schools carries another layer of stigma as "cultural other" in South Korea. As discussed in Chapter Two, students labeled with this multicultural identity are often the targets of bullying and are more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than their South Korean peers (Cho et al., 2007; Goo et al., 2014; Kang, 2010). Yet, in Hankook school, there was no need to label a student as "multicultural." The context of Hankook school removed the need for a special, and stigmatizing designation, while still addressing students' needs based on their past and present sociocultural experiences.

These findings demonstrate how (dis)ability is socially constructed in the education of North Korean SRB. Students' behavioral and learning characteristics that deviated from what is normally expected in South Korean schools were treated as both markers of ability and

disability. At Hankook school, the characteristics of students were treated both similarly and differently than other schooling experiences in South Korea. To some degree, students were perceived as deficient and in need of remediation to catch up to their peers in mainstream schools. This approach does reflect a medicalized response to disability and how refugee, asylum-seeking, and immigrant students are often interpreted through a deficit lens upon relocating to a new educational setting in refugee-accepting countries (Bal, 2014; Gabel et al., 2009; McBrien, 2005).

Yet, examples from the Hankook school illustrate how and why educators need to actively create and implement pedagogy that broadens ways to interpret and respond to the characteristics of these students. Rather than viewing students' challenging behavior as a deficit or indicative of disability, as is commonly the case in mainstream schools, teachers understood students' behavior in context, from an emic perspective in which students' behavior was understood as a rational response to their circumstances. Further, despite being described as academically behind their native South Korean peers, teachers and school leaders continuously emphasized to students that their experiences as refugees were an asset – a marker of ability in areas such as empathy and future leadership – rather than only a deficit.

Together, these findings demonstrate how (dis)ability is socially constructed in that the interpretations of a given group (i.e., North Korean SRB) are not inevitable (Hacking, 1999), but rather the result of fluid and context-dependent meanings and practices. In this case, the characteristics of North Korean SRB in mainstream schools were viewed differently, as markers of (dis)ability, demonstrating how individuals may be considered as less abled in one context and more abled in another. In the United States, racial, linguistic, cultural, economic, and social minority students disproportionately receive disability labels and receive special education

services in more restrictive environments (Blanchett, 2006; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006). In 2013, educational policy makers in Italy created a policy in which “learners with cultural, linguistic and socio-economic disadvantages” would be eligible to receive special education services (D’Alessio, 2018, para. 6). Currently, a growing number of school-age refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants are being included in this category when they relocate to Italy (Migliarini, 2017). In South Korea, North Korean SRB’s behavioral characteristics are interpreted as “violent” or “deficient” by teachers, which lead them to drop out of mainstream schools (Kim, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2013). Yet, looking at the example of North Korean SRB at Hankook school demonstrates how interpreting students as (dis)abled, and the practices that accompany certain assumptions about students’ abilities, are not inevitable. Hankook school provides an opportunity to learn from practices (e.g., decentering the qualities that are often considered normative markers of ability, highlighting students’ backgrounds as assets) in a separate school, so that these practices can be applied in mainstream schools in a way that does not rely solely on deficit interpretations of students’ abilities as the foundation of educational approaches.

**Culturally responsive education.** Participants in this study highlighted the importance of trusting relationships between students and teachers. Throughout this study, I learned that strong student-teacher relationships supported students to develop self-esteem and positive academic identities. The results of this study suggest that one way to promote a strong student-teacher relationship is through hiring teachers and school professionals who share similar backgrounds as students in schools. Many students and teachers at Hankook school recognized the importance of having teachers and a visiting mental health professional who had North Korean refugee backgrounds. Because these individuals shared lived experiences of being North

Korean refugees, they were able to provide students with authentic and practical supports and advice. This finding is particularly relevant for urban schools in the U.S. where a majority of students with minoritized identities have long been served by white, middle class teachers (Bates & Glick, 2013; Sleeter, 2005).

Among the teachers who did not share a similar refugee background with students, another way to build strong student-teacher relationships was to try to develop an understanding of students' background. For example, teachers mentored students daily through formal and informal meetings and home visits. Through these meetings, students were able to share their past with their teachers, as well as the personal issues with which they were dealing. The trust built between students and teachers enabled teachers to be able to discern whether students' behaviors—often described as challenging in mainstream schools—were a temporary reaction to the challenges that students faced or something to be referred to a mental health professional. Understanding challenges and struggles that each student was dealing with, teachers at Hankook school did not blame students for their challenging behaviors, but rather sought to understand and provide necessary supports. This finding brings an important message to both the South Korean education system and the U.S. public schools.

Within the South Korean education system, the Ministry of Education officially announced that the goal of education is to enhance the country's power in the global economy through fostering students to become competent individuals and to meet the rapidly changing demands of society (MOE, 2015). The current education system, therefore, promotes more competition between students, while failing to meet individual needs of students with diverse backgrounds. Within the current education system and culture, students who do not prove their “competency” as a student are inevitably pushed out of the mainstream and easily neglected by

teachers. As several student participants identified (e.g., M.J., Hyang, Mi), their presence in mainstream schools was almost invisible while teachers neither recognized students' needs nor provided adequate educational supports. The findings of my study suggest ways that educators can broaden ways to interpret and respond to the characteristics of cultural and ethnic minority students. Teachers at Hankook school demonstrated methods of acknowledging and supporting the strengths of students who might otherwise not have their strengths recognized.

In U.S. public schools, the implementation of zero tolerance policies towards students with “challenging behaviors” promotes racial segregation and the school-to-prison pipeline. Despite its intention to secure the safety of learning environments, zero tolerance policies have failed to meet their initial goals. Instead, these policies have resulted in teachers and school administrators increasingly referring students to the juvenile justice system (APAZTTF, 2008). Furthermore, racial, cultural, and economic minority students are disproportionately subject to the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014; Skiba et al., 2005). Teachers and school leaders at Hankook school took approaches that strongly contrast with zero tolerance policies. They sought to understand challenging and even violent behavior as reasonable responses to students' environment and as a sign that students needed more support, not punishment. As one experienced teacher at Hankook school said, “I had a hard time because of my students. However, as time went by and as I learned more about my students' backgrounds, I began to better understand them, why they show such behaviors.” Consistent with Ladson-Billings' (2009) claims about culturally relevant teaching, the findings of this study demonstrate the need for teachers to make deliberate efforts to better understand the context of students' behavior, and be visible in students' lives through community involvement, mentoring, and ongoing communication with students' families.

## **Limitations**

A key limitation of this study is that the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to students with refugee backgrounds different from North Korean SRB. Unlike many school-age students from countries other than North Korea, North Korean SRB receive South Korean citizenship as well as various educational and social benefits shortly after arriving in South Korea. Students with North Korean heritage (who were born to North Korean parents outside of North Korea) and refugees from countries other than North Korea are not eligible to receive such benefits. Because of the different legal benefits given to students based on their background, North Korean SRB face circumstances and challenges that differ from students with refugee backgrounds in different contexts. In my study, even the six student participants who seemingly shared similar backgrounds as North Korean SRB showed great differences (e.g., in their refugee experiences, gender, age, socioeconomic status in North Korea). The unique position of North Korean SRB as a group, and the differences across individuals illustrates the importance of not collapsing minoritized individuals into one group when they do not share many of the same experiences. The limitation of not generalizing the findings of this study to other refugees or immigrant students also highlights the necessity of understanding students' unique background and the schooling experiences that they encounter in their new society.

## **Directions for Future Research**

Considering the findings of this study, further research is needed in several areas. As mentioned earlier, students with North Korean heritage face challenges to understanding their own identities, formerly as Chinese and then as South Korean. Their background as having North Korean heritage adds another layer of complexity to understanding their identity. Students with North Korean heritage that I met at Hankook school experienced challenges navigating South



Korea's education system as an outsider. They also struggled to address their social and familial relationships, having reunited with their parents (mostly mothers) in South Korea after several years of separation. In my dissertation study, I focused on understanding experiences of North Korean SRB because I was not aware of the struggles that students with North Korean heritage face until I met them through my fieldwork at Hankook school. However, there is a need to further examine the experiences of students with North Korean heritage who do not qualify for receiving "North Korean refugee benefits," therefore facing multiple oppressions in the South Korean education system.

Another research area that I hope to examine in the future is the post-secondary experiences of North Korean SRB. Internationally, research on refugee students' experiences after graduating from secondary schools is scarce. Being educated in a school separate from South Korean peers, several North Korean SRB expressed their concern about transitioning to college. One challenge posed by the transition to college from Hankook school, or other alternative schools, is that North Korean SRB finally become integrated into a school environment with South Korean peers. Examining the experiences that North Korean SRB have when attending mainstream post-secondary education in South Korea will expand research focused on young adults with refugee backgrounds in the post-secondary level.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that ethnic and cultural minority students are perceived as inferior versions of majority students is nothing new. Researchers in the U.S. have, for years, developed and expanded culturally responsive educational models that attempt to reframe how educators respond to minority students, encouraging teachers to support the academic and behavior characteristics that minority students bring into the classroom (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings,

1995). The findings of this study suggest ways that educators (both pre-service and in-service teachers) and administrators can recognize, value, and support students with minoritized identities, such as the students with refugee backgrounds in this study. The implications of these findings provide educators who work with minoritized students with alternative approaches to the deficit paradigm that is often used with minority students, so that they build structures and practices that meet the needs of students who face challenging circumstances. Further, several teaching strategies and philosophical approaches that teachers at Hankook school practiced to better serve students (e.g., understanding students' characteristics as assets and strengths, rather than deficiencies) could serve as a model for mainstream schools in South Korea as well as the United States.

While I have reported supportive practices identified by teachers and students at Hankook school, I have not indented to praise or justify the separate school model for North Korean SRB in South Korean. The findings of this study demonstrate that North Korean SRB have a severely constrained choice for schooling, between being faced with discrimination and a lack of individualized support in mainstream schools, or foregoing social integration with South Korean peers in favor of the individualized supports and sense of community offered by an alternative school such as Hankook school. I recognize the tension of doing my dissertation study in a restrictive alternative school, while simultaneously seeking to identify practices that promote inclusive education. Rather than justifying the model of separate North Korean SRB from their South Korean peers, I hope the findings of this study offer an example that we can still learn lessons from more restrictive school models, while still remaining critical of the inadequate systems that allow such schools to exist in the first place. The successes happening at Hankook school, such as examples of culturally responsive pedagogy and individualized supports are

feasible for current teachers in mainstream schools and not unique to an alternative school. But importantly, we must first identify where supportive practices are happening. Transferring lessons from Hankook School into mainstream is, I believe, a means to the end of providing real choices for schooling for North Korean SRB.

## Appendix A

### Interview Protocols for teachers

1. Can you describe your role at your school?
2. What subjects do you teach?
3. Could you tell me a little about the educational goals of each of these subjects?
4. Could you tell me a little about the curriculum of these subjects that you teach?
5. How would you describe the educational philosophy of your school?
6. How would you describe the differences and similarities between your own educational philosophy and the educational philosophy of your school?
7. What difference, if any, do you see in the teaching philosophy and practices between your school and the general education schools in South Korea? Do you think the unique teaching philosophy and educational practices at Hankook school could be implemented in general education schools?
8. Do you consider students' refugee backgrounds in planning the curriculum for your classes? If so, what do you do to incorporate or reflect a student's refugee background in your teaching?
9. What are some of the challenges you encounter when working with or teaching students at Hankook school?
10. What are some of the challenges you encounter working in this school, if any?
11. Tell me a little bit about what you think disability is.
12. Are there any students with disabilities at your school? If so, what supports are provided to them?

13. When you meet students who struggle with issues that are related to their refugee experience, what kind of support do you provide to them?
14. During my work at Hankook school, I observed close relationships between teachers and students, teachers making home visits to students, and the availability of medical support programs for students. What impact do you think these types of relationships and supports are making on students' success, both academically and personally?
15. What do you think about the separate learning environment for refugee students at Hankook school that is not integrated with their South Korean peers in mainstream schools?
16. How do you envision the future of this school, in 10, 20, or 30 years?
17. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?

## **Appendix B**

### Interview protocols for school leaders

1. Can you describe your role at your school?
2. Can you tell me a little about the educational philosophy at your school?
3. I have observed that the educational philosophy at Hankook school recognizes students' refugee backgrounds as being an asset for their future. Tell me a little bit about how you came up with this unique educational philosophy.
4. How would you describe the differences and similarities between your own educational philosophy and the educational philosophy of your school?
5. How do you incorporate a student's refugee experience into your work at your school?
6. What are some of the challenges you experience as an administrator in your school?
7. What do you think about the separate learning environment for refugee students at Hankook school that is not integrated with their South Korean peers in mainstream schools?
8. How do you envision the future of this school, in 10, 20, or 30 years?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?

## Appendix C

### Interview protocols for students

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Have you attended school in North Korea? If so, up to which grade did you attend school in North Korea?
3. Can you describe a typical school day in North Korea?
4. What subjects did you study in your North Korean schools?
5. What was your most/least favorite subjects/activities in schools in North Korea, and why?
6. What kind student were you in North Korea? If your friends were asked to describe who you are, what would they say?
7. Tell me a little bit about what you think disability is.
8. Looking back, what do you think you were/are good (or bad) at before, during, and after your relocation to South Korea? (This does not have to be related to your academic skill.) What did/do your friends or family members tell you about what your strengths and weaknesses were/are?
9. What kinds of students were most/least popular (or were recognized among your peers and teachers) at schools that you have attended so far? Tell me some characteristics of those students.
10. How long have you been enrolled in your school in South Korea?
11. Have you attended other schools before you came to this school? If so, could you tell me how long you attended your previous school and why you decided to transfer to the current school?

12. If you attended other schools prior to Hankook school, tell me about your previous schooling experiences in comparison to Hankook school.
13. Can you tell me about your experiences interacting with teachers in the schools that you attended so far?
14. What kind of educational supports were provided to you in North Korea?
15. What kind of educational supports are provided to you at Hankook school?
16. Among those supports provided, which ones are most/least helpful for you and why?
17. I noticed that Hankook school provides many different activities and supports for students, such as counseling, medical support, free tuition and, scholarships. Did you participate in any of these activities? Did you receive any of these supports? If so, what impact did these activities and supports have on you?
18. Have you experienced discrimination before, during, and after your relocation to South Korea? If so, can you tell me more about the discrimination that you faced?
19. Do you think your personality or viewpoints have changed over time before, during, and after your relocation? If so, tell me a little about your experience and how it shaped your personality or viewpoints.
20. Hankook school's mission is rooted in Christian values. What do you think about that?
21. What do you think about the separate learning environment of Hankook school that is not integrated with your South Korean peers in mainstream schools?
22. Is there anything else you would like to share related to your educational experiences?



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*Unification Affairs*, 47(32), 145-175. 유지웅 (2008). 북한이탈주민의 사회적 배제.

*통일문제연구*. 47(32), 145-175.

# Yosung Song

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+ <https://syr.academia.edu/YosungSong>

## EDUCATION

### Ph.D. in Special Education

*December 2018*

Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY  
Dissertation Committee: Dr. Alan Foley (chair), Dr. Beth Ferri, Dr. Eunjung Kim

#### Certificate of Advanced Study:

- Disability Studies *Spring 2017*  
School of Education, Syracuse University
- Leadership of International and Non-Government Organizations *Fall 2015*  
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University

### M.P.S. in Humanistic/Multicultural Education

*May 2012*

State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY  
Advisor: Terry Murray, Ph.D.  
Award: **Outstanding Graduate Award**

### B.A. in Elementary Education

*February 2004*

Seoul National University of Education, Seoul, South Korea  
Advisor: Jungwon Kim, Ph.D.

## TEACHING CREDENTIALS

### Certificate of University Teaching (CUT)

*Spring 2016*

Future Professoriate Program, Syracuse University

### Professional Certificate:

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) *August 2009*  
Nova South Eastern University, Seoul Campus, South Korea

### Elementary Teaching Certification

Licensed Elementary Education Teacher in South Korea *February 2004*  
Seoul Ministry of Education, South Korea

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

### University Teaching

Moravian College, Bethlehem PA

**Assistant Professor** in special education, Education Department

*Fall 2018-Present*

Syracuse University, Syracuse NY

### **Instructor of Record**

- SPE 615: Seminar in Special Education Teaching *Fall 2016-Spring 2017*

### **Co-Instructor**



- SPE 434: Collaborative Teaching for Inclusive Education *Fall 2017-Spring 2018*
- EED 464: Student Teaching Seminar  
in Inclusive Elementary and Special Education *Fall 2017*
- SPE 614: Critical Issues in Dis/Ability and Inclusion *Summer 2016*
- SPE 612: Adapting Instruction for Diverse Student Need *Fall 2015*
- SPE 311: Perspective on Disabilities *Spring 2015*

#### **Teaching Assistant and Discussion Leader**

- SPE 705: Psychoeducational Evaluation & Planning *Spring 2016*
- EDU 203: Introduction to Inclusive Schooling *Fall 2014*
- SPE 324: Differentiation for Inclusive Education *Fall 2013-Spring 2014*

#### **Teaching Mentor**

*2015-2018*

- Facilitate small group instruction of new teaching assistants during the week-long orientation.
- Develop and facilitate workshops for university teaching assistants on the topics of using Universal Design for Learning and creating safe classroom communities.

#### **Public & Private School Teaching**

##### **Public Elementary Education Teacher in Inclusive Settings (Grade 1-6)**

Shinsa Elementary School

The Ministry of Education, Seoul, South Korea

*March 2005-July 2010*

##### **Head Instructor in English Department (Grade 7-12)**

Won-Lee Private English Institute, Seoul, South Korea

*April 2008-July 2010*

### **REFEREED PUBLICATIONS**

#### **Peer Reviewed Journal Articles**

**Song, Y.** (2016). To what extent is universal design for learning “universal”? A case study in township special education schools in South Africa. *Disability and the Global South*. (3)1, 910-929.

Won, J-C., Lord, J., Stein, M.A., **Song, Y.** (2016). Disability, repressive regimes, and health disparity: Assessing country conditions in North Korea. *Hague Yearbook of International Law*. 27(2014), 27-53.

#### **Book Chapter**

Freedman, J.E., Jaffee, L., Roquemoire, K., **Song, Y.**, & Veitch, H., (in press). Beyond compliance: Lessons learned about disabled student activism on campus. In C. McMaster & B. Whitburn (Eds.), *Disability at the university: A disabled students' manifesto*. Bern, CH: Peter Lang.

**\*All authors contributed equally to this book chapter.**

#### **Manuscripts in Preparation**

**Song, Y.** (in preparation). Understanding disability in North Korea through the lived experiences of North Korean defectors.

**Song, Y. & Freedman, J. E.** (in preparation) Following through on South Korea's commitment to inclusive education: the role of teacher education.

## Research Interests

Inclusive Teacher Education	Disability Studies in Education
Universal Design for Learning	Critical Disability Studies
Curriculum Modification/Differentiation	Special Education in Urban Settings
Intersectionality of students' refugee backgrounds and disability	

## PUBLIC SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH & SUPERVISING EXPERIENCE

**Collaborative Approaches to Improving Outcomes** *Summer 2017-Spring 2018*

Syracuse University & Syracuse City School District, Syracuse, NY

- Collaborative research about understanding and disseminating effective co-teaching practices for inclusive education at the secondary level in urban settings
- Developed and conducted research projects on Urban Inclusive/Special education

**School Site Liaison Intern** *Summer 2016-Spring 2017*

Syracuse Urban Inclusive Teacher Residency (SUITR) program  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

- Supervised one cohort of 8 student teachers in 7-12 Special Education master's program
- Provided ongoing support, evaluation and assistance to university faculty, school staff, and graduate students around research, teaching, coursework and alignment to grant

## AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS

**The Korean Honor Scholarship (\$1,000)** *September 2017*

The Embassy of the Republic of Korea

- Academic award for outstanding Korean/Korean-American students

**Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award** *April 2017*

Graduate Student Program, Syracuse University

- Teaching Award for outstanding Teaching Assistants/Instructors

**KAMPANY Academic Scholarship (\$2,500)** *December 2015*

The Korean American Physicians Association of New York, NY

- Academic award for outstanding Korean/Korean-American students

**Janis Doe Poster Award (\$150)** *June 2015*

The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA

- Award given to the best poster presentation at the 2015 SDS conference

**Academic Scholarship (\$1,000)** *January 2015*

All Nation Church Scholarship Foundation, Lake View Terrace, CA

- Academic award for outstanding Korean/Korean-American students

**Outstanding Graduate Award** *May 2012*

State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY

- Award given to the outstanding graduate in Humanistic/Multicultural Education Program

## GRANT FUNDED EXPERIENCE

### Research Grant

**Research and Creative Writing Grant Competition (\$1000)** *May 2017*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to conduct research on education of North Korean refugee students in South Korea

**Research and Creative Writing Grant Competition (\$1000)** *May 2016*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to conduct research on inclusive education in South Korea teacher education programs

**Research and Creative Writing Grant Competition (\$500)** *May 2015*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to conduct research on understanding disability in North Korea

**Research and Creative Writing Grant Competition (\$1,000)** *June 2014*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to conduct research on Universal Design for Learning in South Africa

**Himan Brown Funding (\$4,800)** *Summer 2014*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to conduct research initiating inclusive teaching philosophy with special education teachers in South African township special education schools

### Travel Grant

**Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group Travel Grant (Total of \$350)** *2017;2015*  
Disability Studies in Education SIG at AERA

**Graduate Student Organization Travel Grant (Total of \$1,380)** *2017;2016;2015;2014*  
Syracuse University, Graduate Student Organization, Syracuse, NY

**Graduate Student Travel Grant (Total of \$1,600)** *2017;2016;2015;2014*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

**Disability Studies in Education Conference Grant (Total of \$1250)** *2015;2014*  
Syracuse University, The Center on Human Policy, Syracuse, NY

**Himan Brown Funding (\$1,500)** *Winter 2014*  
Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY

- Used funds to participate in *Disability Access in Vietnam* Winter Program

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS (REFEREED)

### International & National

**Song, Y.** (April 2017). *Navigating within and outside of the local context: A lesson from qualitative research in South Africa*. Panel Presentation at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas.

Freedman, J.E., & **Song, Y.** (April 2017). *Following through on South Korea's commitment to inclusive education: The role of teacher education*. Round Table Presentation at American Education Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas.

**Song, Y.** (June 2016). *The intersection of disability and refugee status: The educational experiences of North Korean refugees*. Paper Presentation at Disability Studies in Education 2016 Conference, University of Northern Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

**Song, Y.** (April 2016). *Understanding disability in North Korea through the lived experiences of North Korean defectors*. Round Table Presentation at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Washington DC.

**Song, Y.** (June 2015). *Understanding the dynamics of poverty and disability in South African township schools*. Poster presentation at Society for Disability Studies Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia.

**Song, Y.** (April 2015). *To what extent is universal design for learning "universal"?: A case study in township special education schools in South Africa*. Round Table Presentation at American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois.

**Song, Y.** (December 2014). *Overlapping narratives: A foreigner's perspectives on misrepresentation of autism in American culture*. TASH Talk at TASH (formerly The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Annual Conference, Washington D.C.

**Song, Y.** (December 2014). *Insights of South African teachers on the implementation of principles of UDL*. TASH Talk at TASH (formerly The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Annual Conference, Washington D.C.

**Song, Y.** (2014 July). *Cultural capital and ethnic identities of FOB (fresh off the boat): A disability studies perspective*. Paper Presentation at Disability Studies in Education 2014 Conference, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

### Local

**Song, Y.** (2014 March). *Becoming FOB (fresh off the boat): Multiple layers of othering in Asian-American society*. Paper Presentation at Equity and Social Justice Annual Conference, Syracuse, New York.

## INVITED TALKS

**Song, Y.** (November 2017). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: Conducting participant observations, case studies, and interviews*. Gyeongin National University of Education, Incheon, South Korea.

**Song, Y.** (May 2016). *Examining different perspective to understand disability in the classroom.* Soon Chun Hyang University, Asan, Chungnam, South Korea.

**Song, Y.** (March 2016). *Different perspective to understand disability in South Korean classrooms.* Seoul National University of Education, Seoul, South Korea.

**Song, Y.** (March 2015). *Expanding the meaning of multicultural education in South Korea through the philosophy of Universal Design for Learning.* Seoul National University of Education, Seoul, South Korea.

## GRANT WRITING EXPERIENCE

Ferri, B (PI). & White, J., (Co-PI) (2015). *Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities— Preparation of Special Education, Early Intervention, and Related Services Leadership Personnel.* **Song, Y.** assisted in research and writing. Requested \$1,000,000. Personnel Development Grant at Syracuse University.

## SERVICE

### Service to the Profession

**Peer-Reviewer** 2016-Present  
American Educational Research Association (AERA)  
• Disability Studies in Education, Special Interest Group

**Consultant** Fall 2016  
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Documentary Team  
• Consulted human rights issues around disability in North Korea

### Service to the University

**Vice-President**, Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee Fall 2015- Spring 2017  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY  
• Designed trainings and collaborated with students, faculty, and staff to advocate for increased campus accessibility

**Reviewer**, Education Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) 2014-2018  
Inclusive Elementary and Secondary Program, Syracuse University

**Teaching Mentor Selection Committee** 2016  
Graduate Student Program, Syracuse University

**Program Assistant** (Humanistic/Multicultural Program) May 2011-June 2013  
SUNY at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY  
• Developed advertisements and outreach initiatives for the Annual Multicultural Education Conference

**Research Assistant** 2011-2012  
Dr. Nancy Schniedewind, SUNY at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY  
• Participated in data collection for co-author, Dr. Schniedewind's book, *Educational Courage: Resisting the Ambush of Public Education*

### **Service to the Community**

***Sponsor*** for North Korean Defectors *2013-Present*  
North Korea (NK) Mission.org  
Nonprofit Organization in Seoul, South Korea

***Child Education Sponsor*** *2005-Present*  
World Vision  
Global Nonprofit Organization

***English Instructor*** *2015*  
North Side Learning Center  
Nonprofit Organization in Syracuse, NY

***Secretary*** *2011-2013*  
The Mid-Hudson Social Justice Educator Group, New Paltz, NY

## **ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL & VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE**

***Consultant & English Translator*** *2016-2017*  
The Korean National Institute for Special Education (KNISE), South Korea  

- Translate official documents regarding Special Education policy and programs published by KNISE into English

***Instructor*** *Fall 2013*  
Korean Syracuse Christian Academy, Syracuse, NY  

- Created and taught Korean language art curriculum to Korean descendents

***English Translator*** *2008-2010*  
English-Korean translator for televised documentary programs, Seoul, South Korea

***Certified Snowboarding Instructor*** *January 2002*  
Korea Ski and Snowboard Instructors Association, Seoul, South Korea

## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

- American Educational Research Association (AERA) member
- Society for Disability Studies (SDS) member
- TASH

## **SKILLS**

- Native Korean Speaker, Fluent in English
- Creating accessible communication tools: accessible documents, power points, forms, and videos

## REFERENCES

**Christine Ashby, Ph.D.**

Email: [ceashby@syr.edu](mailto:ceashby@syr.edu)

Tel: 315-443-8689

Associate Professor, Inclusive Master's Program Coordinator

Director of the Institute on Communication and Inclusion

Principal Investigator and Faculty Liaison, SUITR Program

School of Education, Syracuse University

**Beth Ferri, Ph.D.**

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Professor, Coordinator of the Doctoral Program in Special Education

School of Education, Syracuse University

**Alan Foley, Ph.D.**

Email: [afoley@syr.edu](mailto:afoley@syr.edu)

Tel: 315-443-5087

Associate Professor, Director of the Center on Human Policy

School of Education, Syracuse University